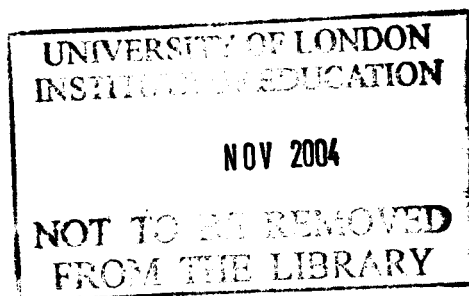


**Rationing (Higher) Education: a Mixed Methods Study of  
Economic, Cultural and Institutional Factors in Progression  
from Further to Higher Education in England**

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## ABSTRACT

Theories involving the metaphor of 'capital' in both the economics and sociology of education are frequently used to explain progression to Higher Education (HE).

However, in employing these theories there is often a lack of consideration given to the role of educational institutions, such as Further Education (FE) colleges. In particular, FE colleges may have their own objectives that impinge upon student progression. Following Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) work on schools, they *ration* access to HE.

Through a mixed methods approach employing multivariate analysis, interview and ethnography it is shown that the ways in which FE colleges ration access to academic courses is vital in understanding educational progression. Considerations of capital are important, but there are limitations to how far they provide a complete explanation of progression. Although human capital considerations partly explain the intention to attend HE they are found not to predict actual attendance nor are they explicit in students' own accounts of their decision making. Similarly, cultural and social capital are important, but limited when faced with the countervailing demands of FE colleges.

Indeed, through rationing, what may appear to depend upon one's individual or community characteristics, such as human or social capital are ascribed value within institutions. For example, there have been recent concerns with the academic potential and community cohesion of white, working class communities. Through

ethnographic analysis it is shown how this manifests itself in one FE site in terms of the students in the study being particularly pathologised as 'white trash'. This has particular consequences for their progression to HE.

Because institutions, particularly FE colleges, have a key role in rationing opportunity and classifying students they are a key site in the 'widening participation' debate.

According to my research, to 'widen participation' in its fullest sense, those who work in FE will need to take actions which would lead to institutional change across the sector.

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## **Declaration**

I confirm that this thesis is my own original work which was conducted independently.



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## **CHAPTER 1: WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN CONTEXT**

### **1.1. INTRODUCTION**

In an era in which performance indicators and targets have become central to government policy it is no surprise that one of the early moves of the Labour government elected in the United Kingdom in 1997 was to increase the number of targets for participation in Lifelong Learning (Wolf, 2002: 107). One of the most contentious of these new targets was the intention to increase the percentage of the population under 30 who are in possession of a degree from 43% (DfES, 2003a: 57) to 50% by 2010 (Archer; Hutchings, Leathwood and Ross, 2003: 194). The proposed sources of this expansion included increasing the proportion of mature student returners to education (DfES, 2003a: 71) and those pursuing vocational, foundation degrees through workplace training (DfES, 2003a: 57-58). These groups have been categorised as ‘alternative’ students who are under-represented in HE generally, although they comprise a sizeable proportion of entrants to the former polytechnics (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997: 8).

Although ‘alternative’ students were one part of the strategy, the main thrust of the initiative concerning participation in HE (Higher Education) was explicitly aimed at 16-19 year olds in full time education, particularly in Further Education (FE) colleges (DfES, 2003a: 62-63). In particular, it was expected that HE institutions would be able to increase their enrolments from what has become to be known as ‘non-

traditional', as well as 'alternative', groups (DfES, 2003a: 69) who did not comprise a significant proportion of the current student population - namely students from working class, or poor, backgrounds and those from ethnic minority families. In this manner, participation in HE would not only be widened, but 'deepened' or 'enriched'. Numbers in HE would be increased alongside an increase in class and ethnic diversity. Although not stated as a policy target, there was therefore an assumption that widening participation would involve more equitable participation in HE.

Widening participation in HE has therefore become an important, and controversial, aspect of government policy in the UK. The targeting of this level of education for expansion can be seen as part of the promotion of lifelong learning more generally involving economic efficiency and social justice as '...two sides of the same coin' (Muschamp, Jamieson and Lauder, 2000: 114). Unlike the previous Conservative administration, widening participation was perceived not only as necessary for economic growth but also as a mechanism through which some form of social justice can be achieved. 'Alternative' and 'non-traditional' students were more than an under-researched market for HE institutions. HE would therefore be a route by which opportunity, if not directly income, might be re-distributed in line with New Labour's other welfare policies (Powell, 2000: 15).

Whether these 'alternative' or 'non-traditional' students behave in the way policy makers expect is less clear. Underpinning any social policy initiative, such as widening participation are 'programme assumptions' (Plewis and Preston, 2001)

concerning how institutions and individuals behave and how incentives and sanctions may change their behaviour. Programme assumptions are rarely stated by policy makers but they are crucial to the success of policy. Individuals and institutions may not share the objectives of policy makers and act in a contrary manner. For example, if funding HE expansion through the introduction of variable top-up fees decreases overall demand for places then aggregate targets for participation may not be met. The programme assumption of New Labour in 2003 was that this will not be the case in that the overall widening participation target can still be met given a rise in direct costs for most students (DfES, 2003a: 83).

In this thesis I examine some of the assumptions made by policy makers and academics concerning widening participation for a particular group of students in FE. In practice this means an examination of the influence of economic, cultural and institutional factors in the HE transition. Later in this chapter I will detail the central research question in more detail and map out the structure of the thesis. However, to begin I examine some of the reasons why ‘widening participation’ has become so dominant in the discourse of the current government and, as far as is possible, their underlying ‘theory’ of why students progress to HE. This will not only contextualise much of what is to come but also acts as a counterpoint to the stand taken in this thesis – that explanations which reside solely at the level of individual, familial or community deficit, provide a limited explanation for the HE transitions of FE students. Preferences (in economic terminology) or family and cultural influences (in Bourdieu’s terms the *habitus*) do not sufficiently explain the HE decision. Rather,

what might be called the *supply side* in terms of the ways in which institutions allocate students to courses and the subsequent treatment of students on those courses is particularly important in this transition.

## 1.2. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN WIDENING PARTICIPATION

In discussing student progression from FE to HE it is useful to take a step backwards and consider why such transitions have become important to recent governments. To some extent, the reasons why policy makers wish to widen participation may have little congruence with student desires to progress to HE. Although issues of economic efficiency or equity might be critical for the state, for the individual there may be less prosaic reasons for desiring a degree. Qualitative studies indicate there is little evidence that individuals use the rational, calculative modes assumed by policy makers (Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1999; Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000). This does not mean that policy does not have an effect, though, and the assumptions that policy makers make regarding individuals and institutions may have a real impact on behaviour. For example, a policy assumption might be that the financial incentives for HE participation are clear and unambiguous. When translated into policies that increase the direct cost of HE provision this might act as a further disincentive to students whose perception of those incentives is less certain. Matches or mis-matches between policy discourse and practice and student discourse and practice are potentially important in the transition from FE to HE.



Rather than map out the history of the policy debate regarding widening participation (which has already been recounted elsewhere – see Ross, 2003) I will focus on the first five years (1997-2002) of the Labour (or ‘New Labour’) government.

Pragmatically, these include the years during which the current study was conducted. Additionally, recent policy perspectives regarding widening participation are partly a synthesis of earlier views regarding the need for a highly skilled and liberal minded section of society. There is therefore an echo (of the importance of a liberal elite), sometimes an emphasis (on economic survival), of earlier policy concerns in New Labour’s policy. However, there is also if not a break, an adjustment of policy towards aims of social justice and ‘wider benefits’ of HE in terms of health and community. As well representing themes of continuity and change where appropriate, I will also critically examine some of the assumptions regarding widening participation policy.

For some commentators, the discourse and practice of New Labour’s policies regarding widening participation are a continuation of those adopted by the preceding Conservative administration. Indeed, Gleeson and Hodkinson (2000) refer to ‘New Labour’ as the ‘new conservatives’ and there are certainly elements of continuation of Conservative policy with regard to education. Namely the expansion of markets and business interests into the educational sector (Rikowski, 2002), the continued emphasis on measurable standards and league tables (Muschamp, Jamieson and Lauder, 2000; Fergusson, 2000: 207-209; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 26-27) and a moral stance regarding parental intervention into their children's education (Apple,

2001: 36; Gewirtz, 2001). Nevertheless, whereas the Conservative expansion of HE was adopted for mainly economic reasons, particularly enhancing economic competitiveness and promoting economic growth, New Labour also emphasise the social and equity benefits derived from expanding HE. This does not, though, represent a complete break with previous Conservative policies. In particular, New Labour seek to both collapse social benefits into the economic and re-articulate the 'authoritarian populism' (Hall, 1988) of Conservative policies by emphasising the re-socialisation functions of HE and Lifelong Learning more generally. Therefore, there is some continuity of objectives between the 'New Labour' government and the preceding administration.

Throughout the 1980's and 90's government pronouncements on general education and training have revealed two assumptions concerning its economic value. The first was that education and training are key elements in Britain's competitiveness and economic growth. The second was that markets and governments have failed to deliver the levels and types of education and training required by business. Both statements have their antecedents in the manpower planning approach to the economics of education (Parnes, 1964). Manpower planning can be seen in a raw manner in pronouncements by the Manpower Services Commission (M.S.C.) and the Department of Education and Science (D.E.S.) during the 1980's (M.S.C., 1981). The policy consensus, as much as there could be seen to be one, was that the causality between education and competitiveness was complicated, but necessarily positive. The D.E.S. and the M.S.C. did not see the existing system of education and training

in the 1980's as providing the right levels or types of education. The issue was not only one of augmenting the human capital of those individuals already in education, but also of increasing the participation rate. Under New Labour, the belief that education impacts upon economic growth has remained one of the main reasons for widening participation (DfES, 2003a, 2003b). Indeed, the argument that education is necessary for economic prosperity has become so deeply ingrained within the thinking of many politicians that it would be hard to change this official view (Wolf, 2002: 53). Hinged to this belief that HE is crucial to economic growth is a new concern with change and the resulting necessity of education for economic survival:-

‘It would be wrong (to be complacent regarding HE participation) because the world is already changing faster than it has ever done before and the pace of change will continue to accelerate. Our national ability to master that process of change and not be ground down on it depends critically on our universities. Our future success depends upon mobilising even more effectively the imagination, creativity, skills and talents of all our people.’

(Charles Clarke, 2003)

‘In a fast-changing and increasingly competitive world, the role of higher education in equipping the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills, in stimulating innovation and supporting productivity and in enriching the quality of life is central’  
(DfES, 2003a: 10)

As can be seen in these quotes, the constant flux which is assumed to be a feature of globalisation is taken to imply constant upskilling and change. The rather mechanistic relationship between skills and labour force requirements is there in essence, but there is now an emphasis on a range of individual capabilities – ‘...the imagination, creativity skills and talents of all our people’. Moreover, the role of HE in maintaining quality of life given the ‘whirlwind of capital’ is referred to. Here we see some signs of the social being placed alongside the economic in New Labour’s articulation of the reasons for raising participation. Both in terms of the sorts of skills required for the future (‘imagination’ and ‘talent’) and in terms of mitigating against global market forces (‘improving the quality of life’) the social is raised to a position of relative importance as rationale for widening participation.

These additional concerns with the social benefits of education pre-date an articulation of the economic benefits. As Green (1990) has shown through historical-comparative study there is little relationship between the development of national education systems and the demands of the economy for skills. Rather the construction of the modern nation state was the prime motivation for elites to develop systems of national education. However, the class interests of middle class elites and the social functions of schooling (rather than HE) in ‘policing’ the behaviour of the working class were important, at least in the nineteenth century (Green, 1990: 250-252) for the countries which are considered. Salter and Tapper (1994: 12-19) also see the development of an economic argument for HE as developing only fairly recently. They argue that the use of economic and statistical techniques of manpower planning

by the (then newly established) Department of Education and Science from 1964 gave an apparently objective, economic, rationale for expanding participation. The Labour government of 1964-70 particularly welcomed this technicist approach, as opposed to a 'liberal ideal' of HE, with elite knowledge being valuable for its own sake.

Although a 'liberal ideal' of the preservation of elite values and culture never entirely disappeared from HE policy there was certainly less of a concern with the social, as opposed to economic, benefits of HE under the Thatcher and Major administrations. Mass HE in these years was to develop skills and economic competitiveness (Ainley, 1994: 155). Other incidental social benefits of HE were not really considered to contribute towards either of these objectives. Under 'New Labour' we see a re-articulation of the social benefits of HE. These are depicted as both available to a large proportion of entrants to HE (rather than just an elite) and as supporting other objectives in terms of family functioning, community development and social cohesion. Many of these social benefits are then articulated in terms of their economic relevance.

Another important difference between New Labour and previous administrations is a desire to use evidence based policy to justify the social impacts of HE, just as previous Labour administrations funded statistical projects to justify the links between HE and growth. There is an emerging literature funded by the DfES on the social benefits of education, particularly of the post-compulsory form. Much of this evidence is quantitative in nature, using large scale data-sets such as the National Child Development Study (NCDS) although this is complemented by qualitative

studies. Many diverse outcomes are covered such as those related to health (smoking, drinking and depression – see Feinstein, Woods, Hammond, Preston and Bynner, 2003) and family functioning ('good parenting' and family learning – see Brassett-Grundy, 2002; Blackwell and Bynner, 2002) in these studies. As previously stated, references to many of these social factors can be found in the current policy literature on HE.

Clearly, there is no reason why social benefits can not be expressed in economic terms. Indeed, such work has been part of the mainstream economics of education in the last three decades. However, in 'New Labour' policy discourse the social is ultimately expressed as if it were in the service of the economic. New Labour have incorporated the alleged social benefits of HE (and education more generally) into their arguments for economic competitiveness and the restructuring of welfare systems. Following Thatcherism, there is a renewed emphasis on the individual and family as an active agent in making both market choices and in choice more generally in terms of welfare provision. However, under New Labour these arenas for activity also extend into responsibility for a healthy lifestyle and in parenting to increase human capital. Education is seen as an instrument by which individual health can be augmented, family 'learning' can be enhanced and civic participation increased.

Although this political program appears to be empowering and socially normative, it has been critiqued in terms of the balance of rights and responsibilities and the value of these social goals. According to Gewirtz (2001) there is an authoritarian streak to

these policies which stresses 'responsibilities as well as rights'. Expansion of HE forms only one element of this educational strategy, but along with the general and basic skills strategy is seen as a method for changing the attitudes and behaviors of a large proportion of the population. Moreover, economic purposes are expressed for these social benefits in terms of reducing welfare costs, reducing business and insurance costs in safer communities and in enhancing the human capital of children. The purposes of HE and other lifelong learning policies are therefore not just in terms of making people 'Like the Blairs' (Gewirtz, 2001) – middle class, confident and tolerant – but are, in part, economically motivated.

Of course, the discourse of education, including HE, as socially (and therefore economically) beneficial is not necessarily a coherent view within the DfES. The interests of ministers have tended to shift over time from social benefits and active-citizenship (at the time when David Blunkett was minister) to a greater concern with vocational and basic skills (under Estelle Morris and Charles Clarke). However, the simultaneous articulation of the social and the economic continues to be a theme of policy pronouncements on widening participation.

One of the other social themes of widening participation is that HE is an instrument for delivering equity, as well as economic gains. This appears in many guises in New Labour policy discourse. In certain cases, the term 'widening' is used interchangeably with 'deepening' and 'enriching' HE with the participation of additional ethnic minority, working class and access students. The terminology employed here is

far from value-neutral and is suggestive of an ornamental employment of (particularly) ethnic minority (but also working class) students as a source of 'rich' culture for HE institutions who must be trawled from the 'depths' of their communities. There is also a concern that the social and economic benefits arising through HE are shared more widely amongst the community. Hence equity and efficiency in terms of resource allocation are seen to be related. This was also a concern of Dearing in relating inequitable participation in HE with a waste of potential ability amongst low participating groups which could otherwise be of use in promoting economic competitiveness (Dearing, 1997).

There are several senses in which equity may relate to HE. In the economics of education, for example, there are concerns with both horizontal and vertical equity. Horizontal equity relates to equality of opportunity in terms of entry to education whereas vertical equity relates to equality of outcome. Gillborn and Youdell (2000: 2-3) employ an extended account of different forms of equity in the sociological literature. What is called horizontal equity in the economic literature (equal treatment of individuals) may be mapped onto their categories of formal equity of access and provision (where there are no discriminatory barriers to participation) and equality of circumstance (where the material barriers to participation have been leveled, for example through a system of student loans). Vertical equity (redistributive equity) may be mapped onto equity of participation (treatment) whereby formal and informal processes of discrimination within institutions are eradicated and equity of outcomes



where educational, economic and social outcomes between groups are equalised. This latter form they identify as a 'radical' form of equity.

Although New Labour does not consider a radical re-distribution of resources, they are concerned with equity in HE in a reasonably broad sense. There is some reference in the (2003) white paper on HE (DfES, 2003a), if not to full equity of participation (in which there would be no formal or informal barriers to participation by certain groups), then with an increase in participation (formal equality of access and provision) and in the sharing of (but not outright re-distribution of) social and economic outcomes (DfES, 2003a: 8). This is in line with New Labour's meritocratic line on education and welfare more generally. However, there is less of a concern with the role of the material circumstances of groups (equity of circumstance) in leveling educational progression, although there is some mention of new financial assistance for poorer students (DfES, 2003a: 9).

Whatever the reasons for New Labour's desire to enrich or deepen, as well as widen, participation, there are strong historical precedents which indicate that it is difficult, but not impossible, to make significant progress. In certain areas, such as the participation of women or some ethnic minority groups rates of participation have increased although this has been concentrated in certain institutions or subjects (Ross, 2003). Many ethnic minority students are concentrated in post-1992 universities in London and the Midlands (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997: 7). However, for some ethnic minority groups there is more participation than in the white population

(Coffield and Vignoles, 1997: 6). This holds even when controlling for social class and white, working class men are one of the least likely groups to participate in HE. In other areas there has been little progress in terms of participation. As has been previously stated, there is a strong class bias in terms of HE participation with those in manual and unskilled groups still being largely under-represented in HE although the former polytechnics did make some progress in attracting these groups (Pratt, 1997: 78). There is also an under-representation of certain ethnic groups, particularly black African or black Caribbean students (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997: 6). Amongst all groups those with non-A (Advanced) level qualifications are also under-represented (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997: 12-15). This acts to further discriminate against already under-represented ethnic minority and working class groups who are more likely to possess this type of qualification. It must also be noted that access or even participation in HE in itself is neither necessary nor sufficient for gaining a degree or receiving social and/or economic benefits in the labour market or community. For example, working class students are more likely to drop out of university for financial reasons than other social groups (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1997). In addition, ethnic minority students are also less likely to find themselves in graduate employment on completion of a degree (Singh, 1990). Therefore there is no easy relationship between participation in HE by these groups and increased equity other than by the most straightforward definitions of formal equality of access and provision.

New Labour has not invented economic and social discourses on widening participation. These discourses – particularly the economic – have been part of the rationale for increased HE participation, at least since the 1960s. However, they have re-worked these discourses to suit the current political and economic climate – and their perceived electorate. On the one hand, there is a concern with the social benefits of education, equity and even some form of ‘Old Labour’ re-distribution. However, given these social objectives there is a particular concern with meritocracy and the collapsing of social benefits into the economic sphere. These are laudable aims, particularly as there are real difficulties for any political project intent not only on widening but on ‘deepening’ or ‘enriching’ participation. Although there are problems in extrapolating historical trends into the future, little progress seems to have been made in changing the class composition of university enrollments. Although absolutely there are more working class students at university, the ratio of working to middle and upper class students has changed very little over time (Ross, 2003). Moreover, there are real political pressures on any party that attempts to re-distribute educational opportunity from the middle classes to the working classes (Ball, 2003a; Archer, Hutchings, Leathwood and Ross, 2003). What this might mean in practice is that widening participation becomes a much less radical political project. There are some signs that this is already occurring with an increased emphasis on short vocational or foundation degrees and HE experiences rather than on a full three year academic experience.

The 'widening participation' debate then is both a continuity of pre-existing arguments concerning what HE should be for and a break from the past in terms of a very 'New Labour' re-working of those arguments. Even though the target of increasing the proportion of the graduates in the population to 50% by 2010 seems to be objective and mechanistic there is some room for manoeuvre in the terms of this target. In particular, traditional notions of what it means to be a graduate are likely to be put under more pressure. Within these shifting sands the government sees a position for FE as a sector forming part of the 'supply chain' in meeting these targets.

### 1.3. ACHIEVING 50%: THE ROLE OF ASPIRATIONS AND ATTAINMENT

In policy terms, then, participation in HE is seen as a twin mechanism for addressing economic and societal concerns: '...education is the best and most reliable route out of poverty and disadvantage' (DfES, 2003a: 68). A further assumption is that it is possible to alter individual or collective behaviour in order to achieve wider participation. To do this requires an understanding of why individuals enter, or do not enter, HE. Although research stresses the complexity of such models (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000) recent policy has focused on both the economic and cultural factors implicated in the HE decision (DfES, 2003a).

As far as economic factors are concerned, an apparent contradiction would seem to have emerged in terms of a desire to expand HE access on the one hand and an increase in the costs of HE to the student on the other. The scrapping of the already

diminished maintenance grant in 1997 together with the introduction of student loans in 1998 raised the direct costs of attending university for many social groups. Along with expectations that either a graduate tax or further student loans would be introduced these moves may have served to increase expectations that the costs of a degree would be substantially increased.

As a further disincentive, the labour market benefits of attaining a degree are also questionable. Although research shows that previous cohorts of graduates did gain a large return to their investment (Dearden, McIntosh, Myck and Vignoles, 2000), other analysis questions whether those who do not attain a degree at the established universities would gain as much in the labour market – particularly if the number of graduates in the labour market is expected to increase (Wolf, 2002). One may argue that the intrinsic benefits of study may compensate for the collapse of labour market returns but, to date, there have been few attempts to monetarise these benefits and evidence is only recently emerging that there are non-pecuniary benefits to degree study.

In the 2003 white paper on HE, it is argued that there is no contradiction between financial disincentive and progression to HE (DfES, 2003a). Changes in these costs and benefits should not act as a particular disincentive for students to attend HE as the economic returns remain high. The white paper *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) makes the case that the economic benefits of HE remain substantial:-

‘Graduates and those who have ‘sub-degree’ qualifications earn, on average, around 50 percent more than non-graduates. Graduates are half as likely to be unemployed, and as a group they have enjoyed double the number of job promotions over then last five years, compared to non-graduates...the returns to HE in the UK are higher than in any other OECD country...So there are real jobs available and *no reason* to believe that higher education will lose its value as more young people are educated to higher level – *especially if the main part of the increase comes in new and employer-responsive types of degree*’

(DfES, 2003a: 59, my italics)

Although these figure are in some part substantiated by other research (Dearden, McIntosh, Myck and Vignoles, 2000) I would contend that there is at least some reasons to believe that HE will lose its value as expansion occurs. Primarily, although the figures quoted are correct for the average graduate of past cohorts, there is no reason why these trends should continue particularly if most of the expansion occurs in lower level vocational degrees (‘new and employer-responsive types’) where rates of return are arguably lower (Dearden, McIntosh, Myck and Vignoles, 2000). Indeed, there is some understanding by the government that, at least for those at the lower end of the income scale some kind of system of financial support is necessary through FE (Educational Maintenance Allowances) and HE (a minimal and partial restoration of the maintenance grant for those with low familial earnings).

In vulgar economic terms, if there were the benefits that the DfES claim, we might expect individuals to respond to these benefits and for applications to HE to be sustained even after a rise in direct costs. However, there may be reasons why individuals might not respond to these incentives even if they outweigh those which are available elsewhere. For economists, these reasons are often portrayed as market failures. The distribution of information regarding HE (formal or informal) may be asymmetric (information failure) or individuals may not be able to borrow against future earnings (capital market failure – although with an income-contingent loan students would not have to borrow on free capital markets). Some individuals may also be unwilling to sacrifice current earnings for future by delaying access to the labour market (different preferences in terms of level of ‘patience’).

Whilst eschewing a strictly human capital or ‘market failure’ explanation for why individuals seek to attend HE, the white paper also presents a cultural and social deficit view of individual ability and motivation. That is, there are anti-educational cultural (low aspirations, anti-academic cultures) and social (lack of peer influences) processes for individuals in the context of families and communities. According to this perspective, participation in HE results from cultural and social triggers rather than simply from a cool and collected estimation of the costs and benefits. The reasons why individuals do not choose to enter HE, therefore, are thereby pathologised as being within themselves, their communities and families. Aspirations and attainment are key factors (DfES, 2003a: 68-69). Rather than presenting the ‘...calculative, individualistic, consumer rationalism which predominates in official

texts' (Reay, David and Ball, 2001: section 8.1), *The Future of Higher Education* contains an implicit model of cultural deficit, or at least disadvantage.

On motivation for HE, there are a number of references to aspirations in *The Future of Higher Education* particularly for the 'non-traditional' learner (DfES, 2003a: 68) (that 'non-traditional' is the nomenclature adopted for this group is of interest in itself, relying on a tacit knowledge that HE is dominated by the young, white, middle classes – 'traditional learners' – the term is not defined in *The Future of Higher Education*). Aspirations for this group are 'low' (69) and 'young people and their families need to be encouraged to raise their aspirations' (68) and success in widening participation is dependent upon 'building aspirations' (68). The work for changing aspirations for HE seems to rely on missionary work by educational institutions in terms of pastoral and teaching support, outreach and student support (68). Whether this support is to be universal is not referred to, and certain programs to encourage aspirations towards HE are very much targeted initiatives (such as the 2003 'Aim Higher' campaign).

However, the extent to which raising aspirations alone would increase participation in HE is questioned in *The Future of Higher Education*. As stated in the white paper, '...students from lower socio-economic groups who do achieve good A-levels are as likely to go on to university as people from better-off backgrounds' (DfES, 2003a: 68). Therefore, aspirations are not seen as determining at the stage of application to HE. Rather, they are assumed to operate through attainment. It is assumed that



‘cultures of low aspirations’ result in poor performance through school and college, resulting in low applications to university. This focus on the importance of school performance for HE entry has led to a shift in policy priorities in that an emphasis on schools, or even a redistribution of finance from HE to schools, may be a method by which more equitable participation in HE could be achieved (DfES, 2003a).

Recent policy discourse, then, is orientated as much around the social and cultural barriers to attending HE as the economic. The DfES consider that the economic case for HE has been made for individuals. The earnings benefits of HE, even given the direct costs of loans and tuition fees, are sufficient to encourage entry to HE. Additionally, there are non-pecuniary benefits for the individual and society in terms of community involvement and even ‘personal and intellectual fulfillment’ (DfES, 2003a: 59). For those students who are particularly disadvantaged, there is some mention of maintenance grants.

All other factors are categorised as ‘low aspirations’ and this represents something of a catch-all category which could include differences in time preference, differential attitudes to debt, cultural factors and lack of role models. However, by definition that individuals, families and communities have low aspirations implies that other, ‘traditional learners’ have higher (not different, not differently valued) ones. The implication is that there is an aspirational deficit, which also manifests itself as an attainment deficit. Therefore, in line with other Third Way policies the ultimate responsibility for individual destiny relies on the responsibilities of individuals,

families and communities (Powell, 2000). Individuals should be encouraged to appreciate and act upon the economic advantages of university and families, communities and government should act to raise the general level of aspiration.

Implicit in this discussion of *The Future of Higher Education* is a model of individual action which places aspirations at the crux of personal, familial and community influences. This model of behaviour is then used as a (perhaps post-hoc) support for a raft of policy initiatives involving activities in schools and colleges (under the 'Aim Higher' banner) and perhaps even the reduction of student finance (as the economic benefits have been shown by the DfES to be self-evident). Clearly, this model represents only one perspective on the reasons for progression to HE. Although simplistic, it does contain the sentiments of perspectives common to theorising in both the economics and sociology of education. That is that economic incentives and cultural milieu are important in transition to HE. These broad themes can be articulated in terms of different metaphors of *capital*.

#### 1.4. CAPITALS AND PROGRESSION FROM FE TO HE

The aim of this thesis is to investigate at the micro-economic and micro-social level the intentions and actions of students in FE as to whether to progress or not to HE. This will involve critically discussing and assessing concepts such as those raised in *The Future of Higher Education* in particular economic costs and benefits, aspirations and attainment. There are clear theoretical parallels with these policy concepts in terms of various forms of what has been called 'capital'. In particular, human capital

and cultural capital although other forms of capital such as economic, social, emotional and academic will also be used in this thesis.

Although this thesis deals with the micro-social and micro-economic, this does not mean that I will neglect other factors related to progression to HE. On the contrary, I will clearly make the case for the importance of understanding the actions of institutions in rationing education and allocating students to courses. The supply-side, in addition to individual demands, preferences or habits is of particular importance. In addition, it is impossible to understand the actions of individuals without an understanding other macro-social and macro-economic forces. The importance of ethnicity (in particular, changing conceptions of 'whiteness' and 'white racialisation') are important concepts in this thesis. Although the thesis may not fit into any one disciplinary paradigm bestriding both the micro and macro economic and social this is perhaps inevitable given the importance of these levels and disciplines both in research and policy. Economists talk about cultural concerns in terms of 'time preferences', 'role models' and 'information asymmetries' as much as sociologists are concerned with the role of debt in 'cognitive structures of choice' and in both disciplines the importance of labour market and technological change is alluded to. However, initially at least it makes sense to distinguish between different paradigms.

Human capital theory represents a good initial point for discussion of progression to HE as it arguably represents a self-contained micro theory of action. As a micro-

economic model of decision making, human capital theory stresses the primacy of the individual as decision maker and there has been longstanding interest by economists in examining educational decisions and related behaviour through neo-classical models of utility maximisation. Although the theory has a lineage relating back to Adam Smith's book *The Wealth of Nations* (1952, first published 1776), the renaissance of human capital theory is related to Schultz's (1968, first published 1961) seminal paper and Becker's (1964) book *Human Capital*. A human capital decision involves the actor undertaking a planned activity not only for consumption but also to alter their real or perceived capabilities for the purpose of investment. Thus human capital decisions involving education, healthcare and migration have frequently been modelled (Blaug, 1992). Indeed, the theory has sufficient malleability to allow it to relate to any process of personal transformation (Becker, 1964). Other than the novel focus of human capital theory the postulates of other neo-classical economic theories of behaviour are followed. Primarily, individuals are assumed to act rationally on the basis of their currently available information. Actors assess the consequences of their actions on the basis of current and expected costs and benefits. In addition, this would include a judgment of the costs and benefits of obtaining further information. In most human capital models this means that individual expectations are rational in the full neo-classical sense of the term in that individuals act on the basis of all currently available information. In particular, they would take into account future prospects for their graduate and non-graduate labour in making their decision. In other models expectations are adaptive and individuals base their educational decisions on the outcomes of previous cohorts of students. This

would be an adaptive expectations model of behaviour (Freeman, 1971). In this model, they would assume that their future prospects as a graduate or non-graduate would be the same as that of previous cohorts. Whether rational or adaptive expectations are assumed, human capital theory is a model of expectation formation, expectation change, and behaviour. It involves individuals modelling their futures adaptively (on the basis of past information) or rationally (attempting to predict the future) and behaving accordingly.

Within the human capital paradigm, expectations arise through rational or adaptive calculation of the costs and benefits of possible decisions. There is assumed to be a universal 'decision making' framework for choices of this type (Becker *op cit*). In order to quantify the value of these expectations human capital theorists have utilised tools of investment appraisal. If the educational decision is analogous to a physical capital investment then rate of return analysis may be employed to attempt to ascertain its current value. Various studies have attempted to quantify the anticipated (ex-ante) rate of return to education (Williams and Gordon, 1981; Psacharapolous and Sanyal, 1982; Bosworth and Ford, 1985; Menon, 1997). More frequently, studies have shown that individual decisions reflect actual (ex-post) changes in costs and benefits (Freeman, 1971; Pissarides, 1982; Micklewright, Pearson and Smith, 1990; Borus and Carpenter, 1984). There have also been attempts to utilise ex-ante data to test human capital theory as a predictive model of human behaviour (Menon, 1997; Hung, Chung and Sui-Chu Ho, 2000). Human capital theory is dominant in policy circles, and alongside social capital represents the trojan horse of positivist neo-liberal

economics and sociology respectively into institutions such as the World Bank and the DfES (Fine and Green, 2000).

In terms of progression to HE, human capital theory is a unified model of decision making and one of the primary aims of the thesis is to investigate the extent to which human capital theory can explain the perceptions and behaviour of individuals and their families. This will not just involve examining individual perceptions of costs and benefits but also whether individuals act on those costs and benefits in making their HE decisions. Allied to these issues are questions of time preference and attitudes towards debt as well as differences in economic expectations between social classes.

Human capital theorists often conduct their research outside of the educational context whilst frequently expressing views regarding the quality and efficiency of education based on input and output data. In most economic research the education system is referred to as a 'black box' as inputs and outputs may be identified but the educational process itself is unexplored (Blaug, 1992). Outside of the 'black box', studies have concentrated on the ex-ante or ex-post returns to education. As previously stated, the former refers to the expected returns to education before beginning a course whereas ex-post refers to the actual returns to education on completion. There are good reasons for these foci. Ex-ante rates of return may be used to predict behaviour such as enrolments. Ex-post rates may be used to assess the efficiency and equity of educational investments from a private or social perspective.

However, economists seem to be unconcerned with the *process* of expectation formation or the *process* of decision making. Rather, there is emphasis on what is taken to be the result of expectation formation (the ex-ante rate of return) and the result of an educational decision (the ex-post rate of return).

In terms of these processes, theories of economic and cultural reproduction have presented a challenge to human capital theory that is rarely addressed in economic investigations other than those in the field of 'political economy' (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Avis, 1994). In particular, the cultural theories of the late Pierre Bourdieu have been influential in recent British sociological thought. However, there has also been a revival of interest in rational action theories which are allied to human capital theory in that decisions are made on the basis of costs and benefits albeit strongly influenced through the frame of class in that risk and transgression of class boundaries are seen as particularly influential factors (Hatcher, 1998). There has also been a 'mini-renaissance' of Marxist economic theory, stressing the role of capitalism in the reproduction of the working class although interestingly many of these theorists reject the types of economic reproduction attributed to Bowles and Gintis (1976) (Rikowski, 1996; Allman, 2001).

Each of these theories will inform this thesis, but it is Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction which is most commonly referred to. A more complete exposition of the theory is given in Chapter 2. However, to summarise, for Bourdieu the roles of forms of capital other than human are central. In particular, cultural capital (a

relational form of capital involving distinct and classed attitudes, dispositions and behaviours) is seen as being particularly important in transitions to HE. Bourdieu also perceives a role for other forms of capital such as social (relations between individuals), emotional (psychological support) and fundamentally economic (wealth and income). The strategic deployment of these capitals in various fields is significant in facilitating educational and labour market advantage. This basic framework has been usefully employed by notably Ball (2003a), Reay (1998), Archer and Leathwood (2003), Bloomer and Hodgkinson (1999) and Skeggs (1997) in examining educational progression although the original theory is somewhat re-worked by the authors. For example, Bourdieu's concept of the habitus (a set of durable dispositions relating to the strategies which can be employed in a field) is re-worked by Ball as 'cognitive structures of choice' and by Archer and Hutchings as 'cultural scripts' although Bloomer and Hodgkinson use the term in a reasonably unreconstructed form.

A second aim of this thesis, then, will be to examine the role of other forms of capital, in particular, cultural capital in progression to HE. This will involve an examination of attitudes to HE and the ways in which various capitals 'play out' in the dynamics of progression to HE. That is, how they are exchanged, how they gain (accumulate) and lose value (depreciate) over time and how these values are embedded within the social worlds of students and lecturers.



However, at the same time, the thesis is both an exploration and a critique of the concept of ‘capital’ as an individual or relational property in explaining such decisions. This is a meta-research question of the thesis which will involve an exploration of non-capitals (for example considering emotional work as labour rather than capital), institutional constraints and macro forces (such as how changes in class and ethnicity contextualise progression from FE to HE). In particular, I will show how the supply side of progression to HE, in terms of the courses which FE colleges offer to students and their treatment on those courses, is a critical feature in HE participation.

### 1.5. ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

In this chapter I have explained some of the motivations behind the strategy of widening participation. Although these arguments should not be taken uncritically, there are at least some economic, and more plausibly social and equity objectives which support this policy. In terms of meeting the objective of widening participation I have explained the importance that contemporary policy makers (DfES, 2003a) attach to aspirations and attainment as well as economic incentives. I have also outlined the broad aims of the thesis in terms of the utility of human, cultural and allied forms of capital in explaining progression to HE. These elements of the thesis will be expanded upon in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively.

In Chapter 2, the emphasis is on the theoretical frameworks of human and cultural capital on which models of the transition to HE are often based. Firstly, I examine

human capital theory. This can not necessarily be seen as a unified theory of action and there are substantive differences between economists and other social scientists as to the scope of the theory. Some economists interpret the theory as being mainly concerned with labour market benefits and costs whereas others take a wider conception of the theory as relating to peer group influences, for example (Ludwig, 1999). I then examine the evidence concerning human capital theory in explaining the transition to HE. This involves dealing with the role of both ex-ante (before the transition) and ex-post (after the transition) costs and benefits of HE. There are a plethora of studies related to human capital theory using survey, longitudinal and experimental methodologies. For reasons I discuss in this chapter I concentrate on ex-ante studies that use survey based methods. From the results of these studies, the evidence on human capital considerations as regards HE progression is mixed and I examine some of the limitations of the human capital approach to HE progression. However, I also examine the strengths of an approach orientated around individual rationality such as that adopted by rational action theorists at the end of Chapter 2.

One important critique of human capital is orientated around ideas of cultural and other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1990a 1990b, 2003) and I examine both the consistency of Bourdieu's original formulation of these capitals and the ways in which this theory has been re-worked in some contemporary sociological accounts of progression to HE. In particular, the role of social capital (peer group and familial) influences has been seen to be of importance in HE progression.

Finally in Chapter 2 I examine the role of institutions – FE colleges – in influencing HE progression. A fundamental problem with theories orientated around ‘capital’ is the desire to locate capital at some level of aggregation such as the individual (human capital), family (emotional capital) or community (social capital) although it could be argued that these capitals could exist at any of these levels. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is both individual and relational, although in practice this means that theorists are sometimes concerned with whether individuals possess cultural capital, or a certain type of habitus, in relation to comparisons rather than ‘...making an effort to ground and eventualise Bourdieu in some specifics of capital activation’ (Ball, 2003a: 8). I examine some relevant institutional considerations which might cause us to reconsider the role of individual, or even relational, capitals as an ultimate heuristic. In the conclusion to the chapter I examine the various ways in which various capital metaphors can be integrated with institutional perspectives to build a more useful conceptual model of progression from FE to HE.

In Chapter 3 I outline my research questions and methodology. As stated above, the research questions are orientated around exploring the role of human, cultural and (to a lesser extent) other forms of capital in the transition to HE although a meta-question is the critique of capital forms as expressed individually and relationally. In point, that the perspectives of institutions are particularly important in providing the academic credentials helpful to access HE. I make the case for a longitudinal, mixed methods study of individuals over two years. This research involves survey techniques, ethnography and qualitative interview and I detail the reasons for

particular methodological choices. The study involves over 150 students in a general FE and two SFC (sixth form colleges) in Essex chosen for the heterogeneity of student intake and experience.

In Chapter 4 I examine quantitative evidence from the longitudinal study. I show how factors such as social class, prior attainment and expected rates of return to HE influence both intention and application to HE. This demonstrates that there is some evidence for human capital theory. At least with regard to student intentions, expectations of HE returns are associated with a positive intention to enter HE. However, there is no such association with the decision to apply to HE. Rather, the student's prior level of attainment is shown to be a strong influence on the decision to apply to HE and particularly influences the type of university applied to. The way in which prior attainment operates in colleges via course rationing, rather than necessarily 'low expectations', is then discussed. The G-score (Average GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education – result) is used by colleges as an indicator of the future academic potential of the student and is key to access to a three A level course, which in turn is found to be central in terms of progression to HE.

In Chapter 5 I deal with considerations of student aspirations and behaviours considering their strategic use of capitals in all three colleges. There is found to be some heterogeneity of student activity with regard to student perceptions of HE. It is not necessarily straightforward to construct a simple dichotomy between the aspirations and behaviours of working and middle class students. In particular, some

working class students were able to employ resources in terms of social capital, and familial emotional capital in making the transition to HE. This does not mean, though, that material differences between students are not important. However, that students occupy the same 'market' (for Ball, 2003a) or 'field' (for Bourdieu, 1990a) in HE is considered and it is remarked that the choices which students face with regard to HE are considerably different.

Chapter 6 examines the results from the ethnographic data. In particular, I examine the role of cultural capital and capital exchange in facilitating progression to HE within an ethnographic study of one of the colleges. However, the 'arbitrariness' of this exchange is critiqued given macro-economic and macro-social considerations; namely, changing considerations of social class and ethnicity (particularly whiteness) within popular representation and policy. In particular, the role of market forces and institutional fiat within colleges in valuing class and ethnicity in different ways is revealed. Together with the evidence in Chapter 5, there is some support that colleges ration access to courses that thereon has a strong influence on access to HE.

In the final chapter I conclude by stating the results of the research and posit possible future implications both for research, education policy and possible actions to be taken by those working and studying in FE and HE as well as policy makers. I accept that models of human and cultural capital, supplemented by other capital forms, do present a partial account of the decision to progress to HE. This may imply that an eclectic model of progression is superior in explaining this decision and I argue for

greater inter-disciplinary (and mixed methods) research encompassing economics, sociology, history and cultural studies (in particular, economists of education should get their hands dirty with more qualitative, ethnographic forms of enquiry). There is a limit, though, to which any model constructed on notions of 'capital' can perform. Even if capitals are relational, an emphasis on capital as asset needs to be offset by considerations both of institutions and macro-social and economic developments.

Finally, I turn my attention to the policy arena. The implications of the thesis are that a focus on aspirations at an individual, family or community level as an instrument of government policy is misguided. There is little evidence from this study that 'low aspirations' alone are a cause of rejecting HE. Rather, the reasons for participation in HE are multi-causal and based on systemic inequalities realised through educational institutions. An access regulator for universities may be a token measure in changing participation of working class or ethnic minority students in HE but for significant change to be affected some systemic change is required in FE as well as earlier in the education system.

## **CHAPTER 2: OVER-INVESTMENT IN CAPITAL?**

### **‘CAPITAL PARADIGMS’ AND A RE-CONSIDERATION OF INSTITUTIONS IN PROGRESSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

#### **2.1. INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter I discussed the economic, social and equity justifications underlying the widening participation strategy of the New Labour government in the UK, at least during the first five years of this administration. The white paper on HE (DfES, 2003a) explores the motivations behind attending HE in terms of economic incentives, aspirations and attainment. This model was contextualised by an exploration of related, more theorised, perspectives on progression to HE from both the economics and sociology of education. What is congruent about all three approaches discussed is the notion of resource – whether of intrinsic value (human capital) or arbitrary and contested (cultural and other forms of capital). It is how the capital metaphor is used, and indeed *over-used*, in explaining progression to HE which is the subject of this chapter.

Capital, as an explanatory paradigm, is increasingly important in educational theory and policy as both a determinant of and policy instrument in influencing educational progression. The term capital itself has various meanings and can be worked into many different forms. In economics, for example, capital has meaning both as a factor of production (in neo-classical economics) and the relations of production (in

political economy). In contemporary educational theory capital can also have these dual meanings (Fine and Green, 2000). However, it is increasingly conceptualised as a resource for individuals, families and communities. This is not a universal understanding, though, and that capital is a relation (gaining or losing value in terms of other individual's capital stocks) or symbolic (gaining value according to existing power relations) are other perspectives on the concept (Bourdieu, 1986).

In terms of progression to HE, the role of forms of capital of various 'flavours' is a dominant paradigm in both the economics and sociology of education. However, the emphasis on 'capital' as a resource or relation has obscured an important counterpoint, or at least relation, to capital as fuel for educational progression. That is the importance of educational institutions – schools, colleges and universities – in the progression of individuals. That we retain a conception of capital as residing in, or between, individuals ('investing in people') does not mean that educational institutions do not have a different slant on their customers – as a commodity for the acquisition of funding or reputation. This was expressed both clearly and cynically in a recent UK television programme in which a (fictitious) character refers to the purposes of business as '...Investment in people...Letting them know that they are our most important *commodity*...' (Gervias and Merchant, 2002: 151, my italics). I will contend that this view (of students rather than employees) also persists in colleges.



I argue that in the ‘capitals’ literature on progression to HE there has been a forgotten emphasis on institutions and their perspective, and that it is time to re-appraise both the contributions of the human capital paradigm in the economics of education, and cultural and ‘other’ capitals in the sociology of education. I argue that in each of these perspectives the role of educational institutions has been downplayed. Human capital theorists largely concentrate on the individual’s perspective removed from institutional constraints. Surprisingly, even the more recent applications of Bourdieu’s theories of capital in the sociology of education also prioritise individuals, families and ‘class factions’ rather than institutions as the prime nexus of the HE decision. That these theoretical capital perspectives have much to offer is without question, and I am careful to highlight the specific contribution of each. However, that they need to be not only contextualised but combined with the considerations of institutions conceived as both agentic and dynamic is also necessary.

## 2.2. HUMAN CAPITAL

For economists, education and training decisions are part of a unique class of economic decisions as they involve expenditure on *human capital*. Education and training may be conceptualised both as consumption and investment. In terms of consumption, education yields utility (satisfaction) in the present time period. This utility may be in terms of enjoyment of the course or more diffuse benefits such as friendships. In terms of investment, education yields utility in the future. This may be purely in terms of income although we would expect education to have benefits in terms of the enhanced enjoyment of future learning experiences. There may also be

other non-pecuniary benefits arising from education such as improved health or quality of life. The opportunity cost of these consumption and investment benefits is the utility forgone in gaining the education or training. These may be money and time costs of the activity.

The crux of human capital theory is that a real or metaphorical component of education is embodied in the individual which yields returns in the future. The nature of this component may be real improvements in mental or physical abilities which increase productivity. Alternatively, education may act as a 'screen' to identify those individuals with high productivity as employees (Arrow, 1973). Within human capital theory, individuals are trading off 'costs' of education for 'future' benefits. If individuals are rational (and possess sufficient information) then they will invest in the human or physical capital project which gives them the highest expected rate of return – a concept which I will return to shortly.

Despite the manner in which the central concept of human capital theory has been caricatured by some sociologists of education, there has been movement in the ways both in which human capital theorists have expressed the concept and in relating human capital to sociological concepts, particularly social capital and notions of risk. Despite these recent developments, it must be conceded that from the work of Adam Smith, for example there was little movement from considering education 'in the same light as a machine or instrument of trade which facilitates and abridges labour, and which, though it costs a certain expense, repays that expense with a profit'

(Smith, 1952: 119-120) to considering such expenditures as being valuable in that they ‘ increase the value productivity of human effort (labour), they will yield a positive rate of return.’ (Schultz, 1968: 21). However, in more recent conceptions of the human capital concept there has been an emphasis on ‘school quality’ (Cohn and Geske, 1990: 131) and with the non-monetary consequences of investment in education, or what Blaug (1992: 207) calls ‘non-pecuniary returns’.

Despite some movement in emphasis, there remains some commonality in that each of these authors would regard education, including HE, as being pursued instrumentally for mainly investment rather than for consumption reasons. Although not implicit in these definitions, there is also often an assumption of rationality (or at least adaption to future events) in forecasting the expected returns from each action and pursuing the educational (or other) trajectory with the highest rate of return (Manski, 1993). Hence human capital theory is concerned with the demand side of the HE decision – whether individuals will decide to pursue an educational trajectory or not. Although this is important, and the human capital paradigm still has considerable purchase on people’s behaviour, the role of the supply side (institutions and curriculum) is often neglected (Blaug, 1992: 216). This can be seen if we examine the ways in which human capital theorists have modelled the decision to enter HE.

### **2.2.1 Human capital and the HE decision**

According to human capital theorists individuals will invest in HE if the expected returns to this action are greater than those involved in other possible activities (Cohn

and Geske, 1990: 94-133). Although there is some dispute concerning which type of method of investment appraisal should be used in calculating this return (Curtin, 1996), commonly the Internal Rate of Return (IRR) is used (in practice, there is little distinction between forms of investment appraisal used as long as somewhere during an individual's life the net benefits of education are positive after this point). The IRR is the rate of discount at which the private benefits of a project and the private costs of a project are equalised. The formula (below) shows how the rate of return is calculated:-

Equation 1: The IRR

$$\sum_{t=1}^n \frac{(B_t - C_t)}{(1 + r)^t} = 0$$

In this formula,  $B_t$  represents the benefits of education in each time period ( $t$ ) and  $C_t$  represents the costs. The value  $r$  is the IRR to education which is the rate of discount at which the difference between the discounted costs and benefits would be zero.

A distinction is often made between the ex-ante and ex-post rates of return. The ex-ante rate is the *expected* rate of return to human capital whereas the ex-post is the *actual* or realised rate of return. The distinction between ex-ante and ex-post divides two principal methods of testing whether individuals use human capital considerations in making the HE decision. Firstly, there are cross-sectional or longitudinal studies where the ex-ante rate of return is used as an independent variable in a model of a subsequent decision to enter HE (Menon, 1997 and Hung,

Chung and Sui-Chu Ho, 2000). Secondly, there are longitudinal or experimental designs where the effects of a change in benefits or costs on decisions is ascertained *ex-post*.

The ratio of ex-post to ex-ante studies perhaps reflects the general bias in the economics profession against subjectivist approaches which rely on questionnaires and surveys (McCloskey, 1994: 282). However, there are advantages in ex-ante approaches in that they provide a stronger test of the relevance of human capital theory to HE than ex-post studies. As Baert (1998) points out ‘...there is a distinction between acting rationally on the one hand, and acting *as if* one is rational on the other’ (Baert, 1998: 168). Ex-post theories can only make inferences concerning individual motivations which may be incorrect (Manski, 1993: 45). This ‘irrelevance of assumptions approach’ (Blaug, 1992: 91) also does not necessarily match well with the inter-disciplinary approach of this thesis where I will discuss the social context of human capital decisions - a ‘phenomenology of the human capital investment markets’ (Kileen, Turton, Diamond, Donson and Wach, 1999: 101). Therefore I focus on ex-ante studies in this section.

In the UK, two ex-ante studies suggest that individuals have reasonably good assumptions of the IRR to HE (Williams and Gordon, 1981; Bosworth and Ford, 1985). As Williams and Gordon state, knowledge of the ex-ante return to HE is important for the status of human capital theory:-

‘An essential step in any model which links private rates of return with the demand for post-compulsory education is that students and potential students are aware of these returns and act upon them. A high rate of return will not influence student decision-making if this return is not perceived.’

(Williams and Gordon, 1981: 200)

In order to elicit the perceived returns to education, the authors obtained questionnaire data from a substantial sample of nearly three thousand students from 110 secondary schools in England in their final year of education. Information was gained on family background, educational performance to date, educational and career intentions and earnings expectations at the start of the pupils working lives and at ages 26 and 46. The latter age was chosen as this was the current age at which labour market earnings were maximised. Additional data was gathered on the estimated level of the student grant and other perceptions of earnings and risk in a variety of occupations.

Using the data, Williams and Gordon estimate expected age-earnings profiles for individuals in the sample. By comparing these profiles with actually observed profiles from the 1975/6 General Household Survey they find a considerable similarity between actual and perceived lifetime earnings. In addition, the perceived rates of return to education (10.1% for men and 7.7% for women) are similar to actual rates recorded in other studies of the period (Williams and Gordon, 1981: 220) although whether students in the sample actually gained these returns can not be

inferred. In contrast, Bosworth and Ford (1985) use only a small and selective sample of 261 prospective Loughborough University students immediately prior to entry to the university. In the postal questionnaire used, they elicit information concerning earnings expectations at age intervals of 18, 25, 35, 45, 55 and 60/65+. This wider range of data intervals means that the restrictive assumption is not made that earnings will peak in the mid-40s. The findings of the study are that firstly expected graduate income is greater than expected non-graduate income in all years. Whilst this finding is not surprising given that the sample were all university students, the authors also discover that there is no reversal in expected graduate or non-graduate earnings prior to retirement age. Therefore, the earnings function does not display its usual characteristic of 'peakedness'. The authors also find that rates of return are higher than those calculated by Williams and Gordon (1981) with men expecting a 23% return to a degree and women 21% given a student grant of £1500 but that this may be due to differences in methodology and sample type (Bosworth and Ford, 1985: 24). Interestingly, there is a correspondence between these figures and the *actual* returns subsequently calculated (Dearden, McIntosh, Myck and Vignoles, 2000).

Although these studies suggest that individuals do have a reasonable conception of the rates of return to HE, there is little conception that an individual 'demand' for HE may, or may not, be satisfied with the offer of a place. In the Bosworth and Ford (1985) study there is no control group of individuals who did not enter HE, for example, which may have depressed the overall expectation of returns. Similarly, in

the Williams and Gordon (1981) study there is no reference to supply side constraints or the role of institutions. However, that working class students are much more fatalistic concerning their life chances in this study (Williams and Gordon, 1981: 213) alerts us that there may be more to the HE decision than rational choice.

Unfortunately, the role of institutions in offering or restricting places can not be ascertained in these studies which concentrate on HE expectations, rather than behaviours.

There is, as yet, no substantive work in the UK which attempts to relate ex-ante expectations with the decision to attend HE, although there has been at least one exploratory attempt using a small sample of students and a non-parametric statistical technique (Preston, 2001). However, there is some emerging international literature on this topic. Menon (1997) and Hung, Chung and Sui-Chu Ho (2000) take ex-ante rates of return to HE and relate these to behaviour in terms of the intention to enter HE in Cyprus and Shenzhen (China) respectively. In both studies logistic regression is used to model the ex-ante rate of return and a number of background characteristics to the intention to enter HE. As stated above, this technique has the potential to provide a valid test of the human capital paradigm with relation to educational progression and Menon (1997: 425) is correct in stating that hers is the first study of its type to attempt such an exercise. In both studies the ex-ante rate of return is found to be a significant and sizeable predictor of the decision to enter HE. In the Menon (1997) study, a one percent increase in the expected rate of return to HE was found to increase the odds of intending to go to HE by over nine times (significant at the 1%



level) and a similar result was identified by Hung, Chung and Sui-Chu Ho (2000). This provides some corroboration for human capital influences on the HE decision in that there is a relationship between the expected return to HE and a desire to attend HE. However, there are problems with identifying causality in both of these studies in that both the intention and the expected rate of return to HE were identified simultaneously in the surveys. This means that causality could run the other way with those who intended to go to HE declaring a higher rate of return (as the Bosworth and Ford, 1985 study of students suggests). Even if claims could be made for causality there is also a distinction between a somewhat passive intention to go to university and an active process of application. Again, these studies reveal a desire to attend university, but not whether students actually realise these goals. Indeed, in the Menon (1997) study the most powerful predictor of whether students intend to enter HE is whether they are on an academic or vocational educational track. Whether this is of their own volition, or whether some form of curriculum tracking is in evidence is not discussed. The distinction is important for human capital theory as if there are institutional constraints on action then it is not possible to infer that the decision to pursue HE arose as a result of choice based on expected returns alone.

There are a number of unanswered questions arising from these four ex-ante studies concerning causality and the constraints which might prevent or dissuade individuals from undertaking HE (Paulsen and Pogue, 1988). However, despite this relative neglect of the supply side, human capital theory does have a welcome focus on the material costs and benefits of HE that approaches concerned with culture and

institutions often forget. These may become particularly important as the expected costs of HE in the UK increase. In addition, the human capital paradigm is not static and economists of education have introduced concepts such as peer groups (Ludwig, 1999) and risk (Brunello, 2002) into their theories of HE progression. In this sense there has been some movement by human capital theorists to accept (or as Fine and Green, 2000 would have it to ‘colonise’) sociological ideas in their work. At the root of the model, though, remains a conception of rational action that provides both a point of entry and departure for Bourdieu’s critique of the concept.

### 2.3. CULTURAL AND OTHER CAPITALS IN THE WORK OF BOURDIEU

Bourdieu’s work takes as one of its points of entry both a critique of human capital theory (Callewaert, 1999: 136) and an alternative formulation of capitals which owes at least something to the human capital concept. That capitals can be embodied (in the person) or can be exchanged for other capitals are parts of Bourdieu’s theory which are common with human capital. It is important not to overstate this claim, though. Whilst Bourdieu accepts some elements of the capital concept as applied to man, he vehemently rejects that rational choice strategies typify human behaviour.

Bourdieu rejects the notion that the assessment of costs and benefits is a universal mechanism of choice. He stresses the social nature of the subject, that the choices depend ‘...not only on the previous choices of the decider, but also on the conditions in which his “choices” have been made, which include all the choices of those who

have chosen for him, in his place, pre-judging his judgements and so shaping his judgement' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 49-50) which means that there is unlikely to be 'constancy and coherence of his preferences over time' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 47). Individuals are for Bourdieu, social subjects, not necessarily interested in the maximisation of utility '...practices can have other principles than mechanical causes or conscious ends' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 50).

In place of a strategy of maximisation, Bourdieu introduces the concept of the habitus as both a structuring and a structured device for the activities of individuals. The habitus is a system of '...durable, transposable structures...collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organising action of a conductor' (Bourdieu, 1990b: 53). The habitus is both a product of the individual's past experiences ('embodied history', Bourdieu, 1990b: 56) and their future expectations ('a realistic relation to what is possible', Bourdieu, 1990b: 65). It is durable in that the individual learns from experience the way in which the world works to reinforce class positions and reproduce social inequalities. By 'class' Bourdieu re-works a Weberian, rather than a Marxist understanding of the term, combining both occupational class and status rather than conceptualising it as an economic relation between classes (Calhoun, LiPuma and Postone, 1993). As a classed phenomena, the habitus is 'collectively orchestrated', a common experience of each class (Bourdieu, 1990b: 60), and the habitus of various social groups can be shown to be durable across many social contexts such as education, leisure choices and politics (Bourdieu, 2003). This does not mean that the individual is determined by the habitus which is formed by

individual action as well as objective constraints (Bourdieu, 1990b: 64-65). Despite this, Bourdieu's concept of the habitus has been critiqued for over-determining the subjectivity of individuals in his work 'any substantial deviance from the imperatives of the habitus is so inconceivable that he does not even consider it' (Jenkins, 1998: 97). This is an exaggeration of Bourdieu's position which does make many references to agency. However, as Skeggs (2002a) correctly points out, Bourdieu's use of habitus is in terms of a middle class sense of agency in terms of investment and futurity (or a lack of it) and that there might be valid working class responses to class distinctions which can be mis-recognised by researchers.

Bourdieu rejects rational choice as part of his (limited) concept of habitus, but he does concede that human capital theory is a special case of a whole 'universe' of other capitals '...the economy described by economic theory is a particular case of the whole universe of economies, that is, of fields of struggle differing both in the stakes and scarcities that are generated within them and in the forms of capital deployed in them' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 51). For Bourdieu, the concept of capital is above all a metaphor for the assets of individuals. However, aside from economic capital, capitals are purely symbolic in that they are of no inherent value in themselves. The value of capitals in a given 'field' of activity is both arbitrary and influenced by those who already hold power in that field. In fields of education, employment, civic and political life an individual's access to social capital (social contacts and the knowledge to use these networks), cultural capital (embodied and institutionalised cultural knowledge such as attitudes, dispositions and educational qualifications) and

economic capital (financial and physical assets) will determine (or be strongly predictive of) further capital acquisition (Bourdieu, 1986). The theory is not deterministic, but individuals adopt strategies in the exchange of capitals the consequences of which are both dynamic and uncertain. However, neither is the acquisition of capitals meritocratic. Individuals devise strategies as a function of their existing cultural and social knowledge and practices (their habitus) according to rules structured by those who already hold capital. It is only in their symbolic forms that capitals are given value and can then be used for exchange. Recognition of capitals as legitimate is as important as the quantity of capitals possessed. In the field of education, for example, those who gain knowledge through informal learning (autodidacts) cannot convert this work into social or cultural capital unless they have the class position to legitimise their knowledge (Bourdieu, 2003: 328-330).

Bourdieu's theory of educational progression posits that a critical factor in an individual's movement from, say, FE to HE is both their habitus and their possession of various forms of capital. The education system represents an arena (field) in which symbolic and material forms of capital circulate and are exchanged for other forms of capital. Cultural and social capitals are exchanged for educational qualifications, which are in turn the key to economic success. The education system commits symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) on the working class by legitimising capital exchanges that benefit existing holders of economic, social and cultural capital. FE and HE would act as brokers for cultural and social capital, where these individual and familial resources are exchanged for educational

qualifications, and subsequently, occupational success. The individual therefore has some agency in choosing from a number of cultural responses to the education system. Individuals are engaged within the education system, where they can employ various strategies in order to convert their capitals into other forms such as educational capital, or qualifications (Bourdieu, 2003: 147-150). However, Bourdieu's concept of the 'habitus', an individual's mode of thought and repertoire of behaviours, limits the possible range of responses for working class students as this is in turn transmitted through the family. For example, individuals may internalise the objective possibilities of the chances of educational success, making lack of progression to HE a self fulfilling prophecy. This dynamism between agency and structure provides a strong conceptual base for Bourdieu's theory.

Bourdieu refers to his approach as 'constructivist structuralism' or 'structuralist constructivism' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 123) in that individuals both experience structures and replicate structures through their thoughts and actions. This clearly implies that structures and institutions are important '....this construction (of the social world) is carried out under structural constraints' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 130), moreover, individuals can not sustain a subjective position '...symbolic effectiveness depends on the degree to which the vision proposed is based on reality... It has all the more chance of succeeding the more it is founded in reality' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 138). However, the use of agents by structures is required in order that they retain their symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1990b: 35).

As Grenfell and James (1998) point out, this means that structure is still important in Bourdieu's theoretical framework: 'Structure is still at the heart of this concept...Structures remain the final methodological unit of analysis' (Grenfell and James, 1998: 14). This does not mean that structures are timeless, though, but they exist as a 'dynamic cause and effect' (Grenfell and James, 1998: 14). However, even though Bourdieu highlights the role of educational institutions as determining (but not determinant) in individual's trajectories (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) there has been somewhat of a retreat from this position in the way in which Bourdieu's work has been recently employed within the sociology of education regarding progression to HE. The emphasis in this process is on the classed subjectivity of individuals and families as decision makers. Unfortunately, given Bourdieu's contribution in terms of the centrality of institutions, schools, colleges and universities only lurk in the background of this 'new class paradigm'.

### **2.3.1 A 'new class paradigm'?**

There has been a recent emphasis in the sociology of education in using the work of Bourdieu to analyse progression to HE. It is not necessarily hyperbole to refer to this, as Savage (2003) does as a 'new class paradigm'; 'a new kind of cultural class analysis, informed above all by Bourdieu's work' (Savage, 2003: 536). This analysis takes the re-working of class, in particular the manner in which the middle classes colonise areas of economic and social life as its starting point. The emphasis in these studies is on the actions of individuals and families within classes, rather than classes as a 'class conscious' collective whole. Although collective class reproduction is an implication of this research, the ways in which 'class strategies' (Ball, 2003a) of

various factions of the middle classes, represented by case studies of individuals and families, is the methodological and theoretical starting point. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001) place their own research within this paradigm where cultural capital is not a collective property of social classes but ‘...something possessed and used by individuals’ (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001: 12). Within this understanding, class is not a straightforward economic category, or aligned to a particular field of employment, but a nexus of various individual resources (capitals) and identities. Class is process, but this does not imply that social mobility has become any easier. Rather, the re-specification of class and the employment of various ‘class strategies’ make the possibility of class mobility more difficult.

This approach has revitalised understanding of progression to HE from a sociological perspective. Rather than examining the cultural particularities of the working class for reasons for low participation, the emphasis on the middle classes as colonisers of educational resources allows for a contested understanding of progression to HE. The combativeness and anxiety of middle class students and their families in forming ‘class strategies’ is a fresh way of reconceptualising the problem of a class gradient in HE participation. In addition, the dynamics of capital exchange and the evolution of individual habitus make for a more uneven and organic form of social reproduction than in parts of what was once called the ‘new’ sociology of education (Young and Whitty, 1977). Indeed, the emphasis placed in what was the ‘new’ sociology of education on the types of labour power demanded by capitalists (Gorz, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Holly, 1977) seems to have completely disappeared from the ‘new



class paradigm'. Rather than an over-determined understanding of the effects of class, methodologically this calls for '...a much more subtle kind of class analysis, a kind of forensic detective work, which involves tracing the print of class in areas where it is faintly written' (Savage, 2003: 537). Indeed, many of the studies employ not only a biographical, but longitudinal emphasis, which illustrates the dynamics of the decision well (Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1999; Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Power, Edwards, Whitty and White, 2003).

Subtlety has its costs. In emphasising individual and family strategies and habitus in progressing to HE, or to different types of HE, there has been a relative neglect of the importance of educational institutions – schools, colleges and universities – in manifestly manipulating student destinies. As in human capital theory, there is a relative neglect of the supply side of the HE transition. Additionally, in emphasising an understanding of class as process, there is a danger that alleged heterogeneity of class experience becomes problematic in making inferences about macro-class reproduction. If there are class factions and classes are heterogeneous, then there is a blurring of distinction both within and between classes. Perhaps this is more meaningful than an employment or economic understanding of class. However, this heterogeneity of individual, family and class faction also hides important commonalities between the so-called working and middle classes. Although distinctly unpopular in much educational research, from an orthodox Marxist perspective the real differences between classes are inevitably not between class factions but between the ruling class (the owners of capital) and the working class

(those who must sell their wage labour in order to survive). However, Marx does concede that the middle classes will fight ‘...to save from extinction their existence as factions of the middle class’ (Marx and Engels, 1980: 44, first published 1872) rather than enter the working class although these (collective) ‘class strategies’ are aimed against the bourgeoisie, rather than the working class. The ruling class are strangely absent from the ‘new class paradigm’ (which is anecdotally not surprising as at a recent sociology of education of conference I was advised not to conduct research ‘above my class’!). However, there are limits to how far resource heterogeneity can be employed as an explanation for differential participation between the working and middle classes in HE. Both must struggle to maintain their standards of living (which Ball, 2003a: 149 concedes in referring to the real anxieties of the middle classes in losing their employment positions). I will argue at the end of this chapter that, again, the actions of educational institutions in assisting the middle classes through rationing access to education of the working classes are a necessary addition to these theories. This ‘rationing’ is partly an unintended consequence as a result of the desire to maximise funding, or to reach performance targets. However, it also legitimises conscious forms of discrimination. For the most part, this is not considered in the ‘new class paradigm’. Indeed, an over-emphasis on the middle class as the modal class in operating markets may have led researchers to forget the ways in which institutions have their own incentives and power.

To illustrate these points, I turn to a number of studies in the ‘new class paradigm’ to show how sometimes reference to institutions is explicit, often implicit, and

occasionally obscured. At worst, this means that institutions are abstracted from the process of student decision making. They are markets in which exchanges of capitals take place. This is not a sufficient movement beyond theories in which ‘...structure provides the frame and that we are act as agents within it’ (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001: 15). The borders of the frame – the limits of possible horizons prescribed by educational institutions – are an important part of the picture which is neglected in much of this research on the ‘new class paradigm’. This is particularly strange in that Bourdieu makes reference to institutional fiat in his own work as I have shown earlier.

The work of Stephen Ball, and connected authors, is possibly most explicit in realising the dangers of ignoring institutions when employing Bourdieu’s explanatory theory. Ball’s calling upon various areas of the sociology of education, aside from other fields such as political science, means that his use of individual and familial capitals is tempered by contextualisation within wider social and political realms. Indeed, he describes his approach as ‘Weber meets Bourdieu!’ (Ball, 2003a: 15) when employing Weberian ideas concerning social closure in his work.

In his most recent book *Class Strategies and the Education Market* (2003a), Ball draws together various previous endeavours to explain how middle class individuals and families employ various ‘class strategies’ in increasing and maintaining their social position through education. Although individual biographies and interviews are used as evidence, Ball has strong reason to suggest that on a macro-level these are

implicated in the reproduction of the middle class as a whole. To do this he emphasises the political centrality of the middle classes in terms of voting and lobbying (Ball, 2003a: 25-40) and studies showing how at a local level, the middle classes may influence the policies of schools and colleges (Ball, 2003a: 40-52). It is through drawing on this evidence base that Ball is able to move from the particular, being individual case studies, to the general. It must be noted, though, that many of the students identified are from mainly upper-middle class families – there are few cases of ‘liminal’, lower-middle class students (Brooks, 2003: 283) or working class students. He is, though, aware of the dangers of ignoring the institutional level by making an effort to ‘..ground and eventualise Bourdieu in some specifics of capital activation’ (Ball, 2003a: 8) meaning how capitals ‘play out’ within schools, colleges and communities. This sentiment is partially expressed with reference to progression to HE. For example, Ball shows how private schools are able to use their social capital resources in terms of their academic links with prestigious universities (Ball, 2003a: 86). Conversely, he also identifies how state schools do not necessarily support middle class students in progression to similar institutions (Ball, 2003a: 72). There are also references to the naturalness through which some factions of the middle class make their progression to HE which is so deeply embedded within their class thinking as to become a ‘cognitive structure of choice’ (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2002). However, whilst the sentiment is expressed and sometimes identified the emphasis is on how the middle classes ‘use’ educational markets through various mechanisms such as information exchange, social networks and investment in private tuition. The relative power of educational institutions in resisting or accommodating

this process is seldom discussed, although Ball (2003a) has at least realised the importance of colleges and schools in the process.

Indeed, in other work by Ball and collaborators educational institutions, namely schools and colleges, are seen as explicit actors in the process of HE decision making. In these studies, the biographies and strategies of individual agents are situated within the strategies employed by colleges. For example, colleges pursue an 'economy of student worth' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000: 177) with the recruitment of ethnic minority students being regarded as both a problem and an opportunity. They are problematic for those institutions which aim to appeal to a white middle class clientele whilst they are an opportunity for colleges engaged in niche marketing. Hence the funding regime 'valorises' (gives value to) race thinking (and racism) in colleges. Within this context, the progression of ethnic minority students needs to be considered not only in terms of habitus and capitals. Neither is how far white students can out-manoeuvre them in terms of the deployment of various capitals of over-bearing importance. Rather, ethnic minority students are positioned by colleges, as well as employing their own strategies of choice. Although the authors are right to identify the metropolitan focus of these studies as a potential weakness (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000: 181) there is some ethnographic evidence that colleges make racial distinctions even between 'homogenous' groups of white students (Preston, 2003b) which is further discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

As the work of Ball *et al* shows, introducing some conception of institutions as actors in the decision making process of HE adds to the explanatory power of their theories. Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) conclude that ‘overburdened representations’ of youth as determined by solely cultural or institutional considerations doesn’t have much to offer as a future research direction for the sociology of education (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000: 142-152) although they (wrongly, in my view) consider that traditional human capital theory has no place in future theorising (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000: 18). I will return to the latter point at the end of this chapter.

I consider that this nuanced and balanced approach to the role of institutions in the ‘new class paradigm’ is not necessarily true of all of the, otherwise exemplary, research in this field. Indeed, some research achieves the opposite of what authors may have intended by over-playing the role of agency, particularly amongst middle class students, or factions therein. The role of choice is thereby applied in a bi-polar fashion whereby the converse of the upper middle class choice as classed as within their habitus is contrasted with lower middle or working class choice classed as outside of their habitus. Even though a further dimension is considered in terms of the habitus as dynamic over time (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001; Hodkinson, 1998) there is little discussion of the ways in which choice can be over-ridden by institutional fiat.

For example, in a number of key studies on post-16 educational decisions (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999; Hodkinson and Bloomer,

2001; Bloomer, 1997) a longitudinal design is followed which means that the habitus and capitals of individuals with regard to progression to HE can be followed over time through a series of interviews. This allows the authors to discuss the ways in which individuals may reflexively view and alter their circumstances whilst clinging on to some notion of social structure (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001: 15). This is a methodological, as well as conceptual, advance on 'one shot' methodologies involving research at one point in time. However, from a FE perspective there appears to be little consideration of the ways in which colleges may bar access to certain courses or act to strongly modify course choice (Ainley and Bailey, 1997). Students unproblematically challenge college recommendations concerning vocational placement (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001: 8), they choose vocational routes ('consumer choice', Bloomer, 1997: 20) rather than have those routes chosen for them (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999: 17, 46, 61), they 'opt' for A level and decide themselves whether to continue or withdraw (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999: 43,78) and are able to successfully contest decisions to withdraw them from college (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999: 68). Although elitism and class distinction operate strongly (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999: 21-22) other than offering distinctive courses according to the catchment the role of the college as decision maker appears only rarely. It features only to reinforce pre-existing aspirations (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999: 23-25) through various learning and cultural arrangements. Therefore, although status divisions between academic and vocational subjects (and hence progression to HE) are 'alive and well in FE' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999: 115, although pedagogical styles may be similar – Bloomer, 1997) there is

insufficient attention given to the role of colleges in making such distinctions. Bloomer (1997) and Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) are therefore correct in identifying student roles in creating identities and opportunities but are less aware of the importance of colleges in rationing opportunity (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; McDonald and Lucas, 2001).

Similar gaps emerge when we examine 'new class paradigm' studies which attempt to highlight transitions of a particular social class in HE. Brook's (2003) study follows a similar pattern to the above authors being a longitudinal study of the role of family and friends for middle class students in transition to university in a sixth form college. Importantly, she is able to distinguish between various factions of the middle class, including the lower middle classes. This means that she can trace decisions made regarding various 'types' of university such as 'old' and 'new' HEIs (Higher Education Institutions). However, in constructing hierarchies between subjects or institutions Brooks gives little explicit indication of the types of courses which the students are following. Rather, the reasons for positioning or choosing various HEIs are located within family and peer group knowledge and experience. Naturally, we discover that this is classed although there is a conceptual advance in recognising considerable diversity in middle class trajectories and choices (Brooks, 2003: 289). However, the overall tenor of the article leaves the reader unclear as to whether the college played any role in allocating students to their A level 'choices' and classes in the first place, and the subsequent effect of this on progression to HE. The absence of



discussion of college or college lecturers would be an important counterpart in exploring the destinies of the students concerned.

The neglect of institutional considerations is also evident in some studies examining the habitus of working class students with regard to HE (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Reay, 1998) as not being for 'people like us' or outside of the 'cultural script' of working class or ethnic minority students (Archer and Leathwood, 2003). However, there is some recognition in these studies that the HE establishments, rather than the perspectives of working class students, need to change (Savage, 2003: 538). Indeed, the strength of working class identities and perspectives in these studies is far from a deficit model of progression to HE (Archer and Leathwood, 2003). It is, though, difficult to consider how these working class values and identities alone could form a project of constructing an alternative to middle class colonisation and hegemony without some form of institutional or structural change (Preston, 2003; Skeggs, 2002b; Thomas, 2002).

In the literature on working class routes to HE, there is not a complete disregard for institutional and structural pressures. For example, Leathwood and Hutchings (2003) consider the classed, gendered and racialised ways in which students are allocated vocational options in FE and sixth form colleges. Reporting on the results of interviews and focus groups the authors comment that 'Some described how they had not been allowed to sit particular exams...(others)...had clearly been discouraged by their teachers' and careers officers' advice (in taking academic qualifications) which

could be seen to have contributed to their own self-identities as stupid' (Leathwood and Hutchings, 2003: 146). This had clear implications for both the type of university subsequently attended and qualification studied (Leathwood and Hutchings, 2003: 149-153). However, the paucity of studies such as this within the 'new class paradigm' means that the tendency to locate the decisions of students of all social classes within their habits, families, locales and class factions is virtually hegemonic.

This neglect of institutions is surprising given that cultural theorists of the 'new class paradigm' take pains to distance themselves from human capital theory. By examining distinctions, the cultural fit between individuals and institutions and the class work in maintaining the positional advantages of education they attempt to transcend a simple understanding of educational markets beyond that articulated by human capital theory. However, there is a danger that, at worst, in referring to mainly individual and family perspectives (albeit within class factions) they are adopting a more sophisticated model of consumer choice, being consumer decision making in which the middle classes are the modal class. In these terms, human capital theory is a poorer relation to this new paradigm, being uni-dimensional (human action being about only costs and benefits) and over-simplified. Although there is something within these criticisms there is a risk that in examining decisions based on the habitus and capitals of families and individuals we neglect the role of institutions and their role in 'class work' – the formation of class inequalities.

## 2.4. WHOSE CHOICE? STRUCTURES, INSTITUTIONS AND RATIONING

Institutions and constraints feature infrequently for human capital and cultural capital theorists. The focus of human capital theorists on the individual decision maker and the demand side of education means that what occurs on the supply side is often forgotten (although I have shown that the social and institutional often creeps in through ex-post assumptions). Cultural capital theorists of the 'new class paradigm' sometimes reference the role of institutions, but rarely as an autonomous site of decision making. However, in the main these are embodied in the consciousness of individuals and in the ways in which they reflexively act in navigating career routes. This cognitive '...internalisation of the structures of the social world' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 131) is rarely detailed as having a real, dynamic existence outside of student perceptions. The sentiment is there (Ball, 2003a) but rarely expressed explicitly. Colleges and their constituent managers and teachers are seldom mentioned as decision makers. They are often relegated to the status of context rather than active agents in processes.

In reconsidering the role of institutions in decision making it is helpful to consider some of the ways in which arguments have been constructed around perhaps the most radical alternative to models of individual choice and decision making – that is structural Marxism. From both post-modernists (Skeggs, 1997; Usher, 1992) and autonomous Marxists (Rikowski, 1996), criticisms have centred around lack of agency, functionalism and over-determination in structural Marxist theories.

Although some of these criticisms are well founded, there are still some truths in the structural Marxist position – in particular the instrumental tracking of students by institutions. Although (I also argue that) Bowles and Gintis (1976) were wrong concerning the close correspondence between capitalism and education, they raise important issues concerning the role of individual choice in education, including the decision to progress to HE. Such issues have been re-visited by Lynch (1988) and Lynch and O’Riordan (1998) who stress the role of institutions as agentic in both countering and accommodating student strategies.

#### **2.4.1 Structural Marxism Revisited**

Althusser is significant in determining the strand of Marxist thought known as scientific Marxism, or structural Marxism, which became highly influential in Marxist critiques of the education system during the economic downturn of the 1970’s. Scientific Marxism is distinguished from its humanist variety associated with Gramsci in its rejection of concepts of humanism and agency in favour of a structuralist science of history (Baert, 1988: 19). Rather than the individual or even specific class struggles, the relations of production – that is between capital and labour – were to be the subject of study.

Althusser (1977) concurs with Marx in that the base-superstructure relationship was not deterministic in a causal sense. Rather, the superstructure (the state and state institutions) was built on the foundations of the economic base (forces of production) in that it was determined by the base in the final instance. The superstructure could not exist without the economic base. However, the superstructure does possess some

autonomy from the base and could actually act on the base in terms of reciprocal action. In accepting this classically Marxist position, Althusser was aware of potential difficulties:-

‘The greatest disadvantage of this representation of the structure of every society by the spatial metaphor of an edifice is obviously the fact that it is metaphorical: i.e. it remains descriptive.’

(Althusser, 1977: 130)

To move beyond this descriptive metaphor, which is of little theoretical or predictive utility, Althusser returns to the concept of reproduction. In reproducing the economic base: the technical requirements, attitudes and class structure necessary for production, the state makes use of various bodies or state apparatus. The repressive state apparatus (R.S.A.) utilises force in the interests of reproduction and includes the police, army and prison service. The ideological state apparatus (I.S.A.) does not use force in reproduction, but rather are the instruments which transmit ideology – specifically the attitudes which are necessary for reproduction of the base. These I.S.A.s include the educational system, family, political parties, trade unions and the media. On occasion, the R.S.A. may have an ideological function and the I.S.A. a repressive one. For example, the police may support a Neighbourhood Watch campaign with the ideological function of winning support for the protection of private property. The education system may utilise punishments such as detentions for unruly students. The education system, therefore, has a role in both segregating

individuals in terms of the class structure as well as transmitting ideologies suitable for capitalist production. Althusser describes the correspondence between the education system and the reproduction of both the base and the various state apparatus:-

‘Somewhere around the age of sixteen, a huge mass of children are ejected ‘into production’: these are the workers or small peasants. Another portion of scholastically adapted youth carries on: and, for better or worse, it goes somewhat further, until it falls by the wayside and fills the posts of small and middle technicians, white-collar workers, small and middle executives, petty bourgeois of all kinds. A last portion reaches the summit, wither to fall into intellectual semi-employment, or provide, as well as ‘the intellectuals of the collective labourer’, the agents of exploitation (capitalists, managers), the agents of repression (soldiers, policemen, politicians, administrators, etc.) and the professional ideologists (priests of all sorts, most of whom are convinced ‘laymen’).’

(Althusser, 1977: 147)

Although identifying the stratification and ideological functions of the education system, Althusser does not attempt to explain how these processes occur. Moreover, it is clear that the ‘huge mass’ of individuals who finish their education at the age of 16 has been reduced over time. However, it is clear from Althusser’s later discussions of agency that individual participation in various levels of the education system can not be seen as arising through subject choice. It is apparent that

Althusser's view of the individual actor is radically different from both human capital and culturalist conceptions in each of which some choice of action is allowable. Taking an extreme position, Althusser argues that subjectivity and choice are in themselves socially constructed. Ideology 'hails' or creates the notion of the individual through social processes. In the current context, the process by which an individual enters HE appears to be a result of subjective choices by individuals and their parents. Some will succeed whilst others will not, and individuals are led to believe that this is a conscious result of their own actions. However, the Althusserian view is that their place in the social hierarchy was pre-destined by their *subject positions*:-

'...the structure of the relations of production determines the places and functions occupied by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the 'supports' (*Träger*) of these functions. The true 'subjects' are not, despite all appearances, the 'obviousness' of the 'give' of naïve anthropology, 'concrete individuals', 'real men' – *but the definition and distribution of these places and functions. The true 'subjects' are those definers and distributors: the relations of production* (and political and ideological social relations).'

(Althusser and Balibar, 1975: 180, my italics)

Hence individuals move through the educational system according to their position, which is in turn determined by the relations of production. The processes which

individuals go through: subjects studied, schools, colleges and universities attended appear to individuals as free choices. It is through these processes that individuals mistakenly believe themselves to be free and active agents. Hence for Althusser, individual pathways through education are endogenous to the system and can in no way be said to occur as a result of individual choice.

The attempts to apply structural Marxist theory, such as that indicated by Althusser, to an analysis of the progression to HE has been conducted at a high level of abstraction, and rarely at the level of the school or individual (Morrow and Torres, 1995: 151). In part, this is inevitable given the nature of the theory in which social classes, or even social relations, are the subjects of study. However, one of the better known of these studies – *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) – makes explicit how social structures might impact at an institutional level.

The extent to which Bowles and Gintis (1976) adopt a strictly Althussonian account of schooling in *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reforms and the Contradictions of Economic Life* is questionable. On the one hand, Bowles and Gintis do adhere to a strict correspondence between the educational base and the economic superstructure, perhaps even more so than Althusser. This correspondence reveals itself in two ways. Firstly, there is a close relationship between the relations and processes of the school and capitalist production (Bowles and Gintis, 1976: 4). This is identified in procedures such as the hierarchical organisation of power, the system of rewards and failure which mirror processes of wage increases and



redundancies, the compartmentalised nature of knowledge reflecting the fragmented nature of work and the division of labour, and the rule orientation of the school. Secondly, through tracking individuals into vocational and academic routes, the education system replicates the social attributes favourable to capitalist production. Many individuals internalise these attitudes and values which reduces the costs of control for producers. In fact, Bowles and Gintis have recently rephrased and reworked this analysis into the neo-classical principal-agent problem (Bowles, Gintis and Osborne, 2001). One of the problems for employers (principals) in making sure that workers (agents) stick to their contracts is the cost of coercion and surveillance. If the employees are pre-programmed to adhere to their contractual arrangements, then these costs are reduced (Bowles, Gintis and Osborne, 2001). According to *Schooling in Capitalist America*, for the working class and ethnic minority students on vocational routes or in working class schools, schooling emphasises rule-following, rote learning and punctuality. For students on academic routes or higher class schools, schooling emphasises leadership and creativity. As resistance to this process is collective rather than individual (as I will discuss later in this chapter), Bowles and Gintis are not open to the possibility of resistance or subversion of the educational process, at least at the level of the individual student (Willis, 1977).

The point of departure with Althusser is in terms of the development of the institutional, curricular and legal relationships surrounding education. For Althusser, the education system is an I.S.A. which reflects the interests of the ruling classes. For Bowles and Gintis, the education system is a site of class struggle between capitalists

and workers – or at least business interests and trade unionists – the outcome of which forms the nature of the education system (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, Chapter 9). For example, mass public education, vocationalisation of the curriculum and progressive teaching methods arose from business interests, but were challenged by unions and workers. So whilst the interests of corporations may currently dominate US education, there is no guarantee that they will continue to do so, and Bowles and Gintis finish their book on a progressive note regarding the possibilities for a radical transformation of the existing order. Another break with Althusian Marxism is in terms of the eclectic use of various positivist research tools such as historical data, statistics and empirical psychological and sociological studies.

Although Bowles and Gintis attach a high degree of agency to social classes in transforming the education system, the degree to which individual's possess the same degree of choice is not clear. In particular, are they tracked along educational routes according to their own volition or due to the institutional constraints of the school? Bowles and Gintis do not confront this issue directly, and offer a rather eclectic perspective on what may lead to tracking. Factors include the relation between grades and socio-economic status (Bowles and Gintis, 1976: 113), the lack of financial resources of parents (Bowles and Gintis, 1976: 133) and the expectations of different social groups (Bowles and Gintis, 1976: 132). Hence individuals are not over-determined by productive relations: cultural forces and lack of finances are also limiting factors. This does not mean that Bowles and Gintis adopt a culturalist or

human capital view of educational progression. Equally individuals are constrained by, but not determined by, the relations of production.

Bowles and Gintis (1976), then, appropriate the base-superstructure metaphor from Marxist ideology and reject Althusserian pessimism regarding the education system as a site of change. This is reinforced by later revisions to this theory (Bowles, Gintis and Weisskopf, 1984) whereby they have moved away from the base-superstructure model towards:-

‘...a conception of society which is made up through asymmetric, recursive, constitutive, overlapping games played at multiple sites (such as state, family, education, economy, community), a conception which, Bowles and Gintis...assert, expresses ‘a perfect duality of structural determination and the contingency of human history on social practices’

(Livingstone, 1995: 61)

In the context of these revisions, we may question the extent to which Bowles and Gintis’ work on education remains a theory of economic reproduction. The correspondence between base and superstructure and the role of class conflict in educational policy making appear to have been abandoned in favour of a conflict model of educational process. However, their earlier work (1976) stands as a good example of the application of structural Marxism to an educational system in a developed country.

Lack of agency in theories of economic reproduction has been one of the major criticisms of such theories from Marxists and Non-Marxists alike. The subject in these theories is believed to be over-socialised and over-determined (Usher, 1992: 203; Bourdieu, 1990b: 41), a duped puppet of capitalism (Craib, 1992: 170) with alternative possibilities discounted. Educational institutions and their employees also possess some autonomy from the interests of capital (Whitty, 1985; Dale, 1989). At the level of social classes, reproduction theories such as those expounded in *Schooling in Capitalist America* ignored issues of working class politics and working class culture in resisting or accommodating to the policies of educational institutions (Avis 1981). In addition, other social influences on educational progression such as the household, community, gender and ethnicity are subsumed by social class (Livingstone, 1995: 60; Avis, 1981; Cole, 1988). However, these criticisms apply mainly to Bowles and Gintis' earlier work (1976) and not necessarily to later revisions (Bowles, Gintis and Weisskopf, 1984).

A more stringent set of criticisms comes from within what has been called the 'mini-renaissance' in Marxist educational theory. The proponents of this largely more autonomous, humanistic and Gramscian strand of Marxism (Rikowski, 1996, 2002; Allman, 2001; Cole, Hill, Rikowski and McLaren, 2001; Hill, McLaren, Cole and Rikowski, 1999) are, for the most part, critical of both the functionalism of scientific Marxism, in particular the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976). Rikowski (2002: 11) argues that there is little correspondence between the direct demands of employers and the (functional) skills developed by schooling. This view finds support outside of

Marxist educational studies both through employer surveys (Keep, 2003) and in the failure of the manpower planning to relate employer demands to skills supply (Youdi and Hinchliffe, 1985). However, educational institutions do have a broader role in creating labour power – the capacity to work and to sell one’s labour on the market (Rikowski, 2002).

Despite these scathing criticisms of Bowles and Gintis, some verisimilitude remains for researchers: - ‘...even now I know of research students who are attempting to “apply” B and G’s correspondence theory to aspects of contemporary English education!’ (Rikowski in Cole, Hill, McLaren and Rikowski, 2000: 17). Although some must be misguided in that internal (within Marxism) and external (outside Marxism) arguments are convincing there is clearly some feeling that there is an over-emphasis on agency and culture in many educational models: ‘...a risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Current research fashion perhaps over valorises and overemphasises agency. Bourdieu has said that while it is true that reproductionism tends to emphasise determination over agency, there does seem to be more determination than social change’ (Shumar, 1997: 18). Indeed, social class inequalities in education have not necessarily improved – there is emerging econometric evidence that the situation has become more entrenched (Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles, 2003).

Despite claims that structure remains important, there has been little re-conceptualisation of the structural Marxist framework which would form a valid

alternative model of educational progression. However, Lynch (1988) and Lynch and O’Riordan (1998) do see some potential in the application of neo-Marxist theories as alternatives to rational or cultural models of educational choice, applying these ideas to the Irish education system. According to Lynch (1988: 152) it is important to perceive educational institutions as agentic, active, structures rather than passive agents of capital or the state. For example, in response to student resistances to courses of study they employ counter-resistances. This may include accommodation ‘..deflating and reconstructing resistances into “acceptable” (recycled) educational products’ (Lynch, 1988: 153). This may include teacher strategies such as allowing students on vocational programmes more time ‘off task’ whilst still making sure that they gain a vocational certificate (Meagher, 1997: 62-95). Allowing educational institutions some possibility of autonomy and agency makes for a more dialectical relationship between structure and agency (Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998: 447) whilst maintaining notions of relative power.

Lynch’s (1988) and Lynch and O’Riordan’s (1998) theories of educational policy return notions of structure as other than internalised ‘habitus’ into models of HE progression. For some this is not necessarily sufficient. Rikowski (1996) criticises the indeterminism of the relative autonomy school of which Lynch may be considered a part. Notions of the relative autonomy of educational institutions are not necessarily helpful without understanding the limits to this autonomy. For Lynch, these are control of funding and curriculum by the Irish State (Lynch, 1988: 153-156). Although for the Marxist Rikowski (1996) this does not relate the process to

capitalism I consider that there is value to using such a contested approach to explore institutional pressures on progression to HE outside of an orthodox Marxist paradigm. As I will explain in the next section, this involves following Lynch (1988) in re-conceptualising institutions (in this case FE colleges) as active and (self) interested agents in HE progression.

#### **2.4.2 ‘Commoditisation’ and rationing education**

Even given the work of Lynch (1988) *structural* Marxism, in particular the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) is certainly not due a ‘mini-renaissance’. The correspondence theory between the economy and the nature of the education system must be considered to be too fragile and tenuous to support much further analysis of this type. Two remaining issues from this type of theorising abide, though. The first is the power of educational institutions as agents in educational decision making. These are not passive respondents to educational choices or markets, but active agents with their own priorities other than student course choice (Lynch, 1988). This understanding of structures as dynamic is explicit in Bourdieu’s original work, as I have shown earlier (Grenfell and James, 1998: 14). The second is the role of curriculum tracks as future determinants of educational destination. Careership and reflexivity can only take you so far in transferring from a vocational to an academic course and then going to an established rather than a new university. Of course, the degree to which choice can be exercised is also classed (Ball, 2003a), but the substantive point concerning institutional fiat remains.

Although not from a structural Marxist position, there is supporting evidence from institutional studies that colleges and schools seek to *ration* educational opportunity and track students for instrumental reasons. In these studies it is the college (or school) which is the primary decision maker, rather than the individual or their family. By taking this alternative perspective on student 'choice' (which is really institutional choice) we gain a further perspective on the decision making process as a whole. That is students as a commodity for the acquisition of funding or reputation (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Hughes, Lauder, Watson, Lander, Thrupp, Strathdee, Simiyu, Dupuis, McGlinn and Hamlin, 1999).

With respect to the value of students to schools and colleges, the term commoditisation (Finlay and Finnie, 2002: 154) of students appears to be a suitable way of characterising the process, as opposed to commodification, which implies that student labour is sold on a market. Commoditisation implies only that students are treated as valuable in gaining funding or reputation for the college. Although most students will eventually sell their labour power, schools and colleges do not gain monetarily in this process, except in a most indirect manner through reputation. Indeed, the degree to which schools and colleges even operate in a 'market' for their services is questionable. Criteria such as consumer sovereignty, the setting of an equilibrium price and competitive conditions are not necessarily established in education (Mace, 2001). This does not mean, though, that educational institutions will not make 'surpluses' and seek to distribute these to their management and governors (Winston, 1999: 15). Even 'Quasi-market' does not fully fit the situation



(Mace, 2001) even though the state funds students and pupils, but institutions decide on the services offered. This does not necessarily capture the state-funding and direction of these institutions, many of which operate as local monopolies. Indeed, their monopoly power or collusion with other institutions (the inability of students to exit their local institution for a reasonable alternative or effectively voice their concerns) allows them to ration opportunity in this manner. It must be noted, though, that even under competitive conditions, educational institutions may decide to 'ration' access to courses as a form of non-price competition in which the rationing, or outright exclusion, of certain groups is used as an indicator of status and reputation (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Therefore, rationing may operate across a variety of market, non-market and quasi-market conditions.

The 'rationing' of qualifications by schools is not necessarily new territory in the sociology of education (Douglas, 1967). However, that this is being instrumentally pursued with reference to funding and reputation is a more recent contention. In an influential study of the impact of market policies on limiting choice in the UK, Gillborn and Youdell (2000) present a case study based on two secondary schools. The strength of this approach is to illuminate how market processes impact upon the micro decisions made by actors within the school without reference to theories of cultural or human capital. The schools chosen have differing governance and institutional status. One is a comprehensive school, subject to local authority control to a large degree. The other is grant maintained with greater control of the use of its budget (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 42). However, despite differences in

governance, funding and management, both schools seek to manipulate and manage student choice. Gillborn and Youdell argue that as funding of each school is determined by the number of pupils on roll, the schools act to augment their markets by enrolling students with good prior attainment in tests. Specifically, by increasing their standing in the nationally published league tables, in which the key indicator is the number of students achieving 5 or more GCSEs at C or above. The league table position is thought to determine not only the number of students who might apply to a particular school, but also the quality of applicants. Improvements in the quality of intake are believed to result in a further increase in the school's results, and so on in a virtuous circle – or a vicious one for those schools who attract a poor intake (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 43-50). As neither school was selective, they have little power to stream students on the entry. However, the existing intake in each institution is subject to a battery of commercially available tests in order to determine which educational pathway they should follow. This is where Gillborn and Youdell introduce the concept of *rationing*: the students who score well on the ability tests are entered for examinations which could lead to A-C grades at GCSE, whereas others are entered for examinations which lead to C-G grades. Streaming determines a number of future outcomes including quality of teaching, teacher expectations and ultimately access to FE and HE. Schools also discriminate between pupils on the basis of help offered. Gillborn and Youdell employ the medical concept of *triage* to explain how the degree of help offered to students differs in terms of their educational track. Students who are likely to meet the target of 5 GCSEs are offered little help. Those who are on the borderline of 5 GCSEs (the walking wounded) are offered the

most as this is believed to be the area where significant difference can be made to the school's league table position. Those who are expected to fail to meet the target by a significant margin (the untreatable) are left to flounder (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 133-164). However, despite strong evidence for rationing in these institutions, Gillborn and Youdell (2000) do not see rationing to be a *fait accompli*. They share with Lynch (1988) the view that schools are 'busy institutions' implicated in forming and re-making class and race distinctions (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 222) and that resistance by teachers and policy makers to this process is possible, although this is perhaps inconsistent with their former views on teacher surveillance (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 152) and the importance of funding regimes (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 220). Again, the familiar debate concerning the relative autonomy of educational institutions re-surfaces.

In addition to their analysis of the impact of marketisation on streaming and selection, Gillborn and Youdell explain how class and ethnic inequalities are perpetuated. The ability tests, through which examination classes are determined, are based upon the same principles as IQ tests. It is the author's contention that, like IQ tests, these tests are culturally specific and trialed on an unrepresentative population. Hence social class and ethnicity become conflated with ability, which in turn determines educational and occupational pathways.

The strength of Gillborn and Youdell's work is that the operations of the institution are examined at a micro level, whilst retaining a contextual understanding of the

economic and social pressures which operate in schools. This enables us to place meaning on teacher and pupil practices as being influenced, but not determined by, economic considerations. For example, careers' counselling with pupils is demonstrated as a tension for some teachers between meeting the demands of the A-C economy, whilst maintaining some professional integrity and sense of social purpose. However, given that Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) data comes from two metropolitan (London) secondary schools, it is difficult to generalise this work to the national picture.

Despite the lack of generalisability, the kernel of Gillborn and Youdell's study – that educational institutions ration opportunity – provides a valid counterpoint to critique theories of individual or familial choice or decision making. As econometric research has identified, prior school attainment is the strongest predictor of future participation in post-compulsory education in a number of countries, including the UK (McIntosh, 2001). Therefore, the rationing of qualifications by schools may be expected to have an effect upon participation in both FE and HE. Indeed, even if students do participate in FE, there is some evidence that colleges, as well as schools, ration access to educational opportunity.

There is some tangential evidence that rationing of qualifications by FE colleges predates the incorporation of colleges in 1992. Although not central to their investigation, Gleeson and Mardle (1980) highlighted the possible interaction between student trajectories and the internal politics of an FE college. Student

‘choices’ were therefore seen within the framework of internal competition between departmental areas. However, following incorporation, there are a number of studies which show colleges rationing access to courses on the basis of funding or reputation. That incentives for the expansion of some qualifications at the expense of others were implicit in the FEFC (Further Education Funding Councils) methodology for funding colleges was remarked on by Barrow (1997). Barrow remarks on the incentives for colleges to enter students for GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification), rather than A level qualifications, as they gain more favourable overall funding and it is possible to add additional ‘learning goals’ to GNVQ courses (Barrow, 1997: 142). However, there is mixed evidence that this has led to students being placed on inappropriate programmes. In a number of interviews with teachers and lecturers in twelve FE colleges, Leney, Lucas and Taubman (1998: 18) find no evidence that students are being placed on lower *level* courses (what Ainley, 2000: 3) refers to as ‘*churning*’ - entering students initially for low level courses so that they spend a longer period in college, gaining more funding units):-

‘..one of the possible dangers with the new funding methodology might be that colleges tended to guide students on to programmes at a level lower than the student might be able to achieve, in order to maximise the funding units available for successful achievement. However, we found no evidence that this was happening. Indeed, there was some evidence that, if anything, colleges might be allowing students on to courses that college staff may have felt was beyond the student’s current capabilities, through fear of losing them to rivals.’

Even though churning was not in evidence (at least in these studies) it does not necessarily mean that students are being placed on different *pathways*. There may be different entry requirements for different vocational / academic routes even if these are notionally at the same level. As we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, colleges set different entry requirements for 'level 3' qualifications according to whether these are academic or vocational. Indeed, in a more extensive period of research, albeit in only two FE colleges (Ainley and Bailey, 1997) it is found that colleges rarely offer students who fail their GCSEs an opportunity to rejoin the academic pathway. Rather, the vocational route is the sole alternative (Ainley and Bailey, 1997: 84). As they go on to say 'The impact of the funding method...leads to colleges taking stock of their curriculum in the sense of the total "offer" or portfolio of courses available to students. This can lead to the removal of individual courses or whole areas of work, which are no longer seen as sustainable in terms of the income they bring in from the FEFC' (Ainley and Bailey, 1997: 46). There is also evidence that sixth form colleges are raising entry standards for many of their academic courses: a 'harder gateway' was being erected, and as there was no shortage of demand for student places, colleges were selecting more able students' (McDonald and Lucas, 2001: 221). The overall effect of funding, then, is more insidious than simply precluding students from progression. Progression is encouraged, *mandatory*, but the pathways which students are placed on are increasingly directed by funding criteria.

As well as acting to ration access to academic courses, there is also evidence that the *quality* of the experience for students on GNVQ courses has declined due to funding pressures. Funding has resulted in a cutting of contact time for GNVQ courses (Leney, Lucas and Taubman, 1998: 7) and some colleges merge GNVQ groups to reduce costs (the 'concertina effect' – McDonald and Lucas, 2001: 219). GNVQ students have also found their options restricted (Leney, Lucas and Taubman, 1998: 17) and are increasingly reliant on textbooks for much of their information (Ainley and Bailey, 1997: 17). There is no evidence in these studies that A level students have been affected in a similar manner. Again, the effects of funding are not necessarily to ration access, but to ration quality and opportunity.

From this group of case studies it is difficult to draw firm conclusions as to whether colleges ration education in a similar manner to that suggested for schools (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Progression to a particular 'level' of study is not blocked by colleges and in the main encouraged. At the margins, there may be certain groups who are excluded from progression. There is some evidence that those with emotional difficulties or who have formally been excluded from school are denied access to colleges who 'select only those students who will enhance retention and achievement rates' (McDonald and Lucas, 2001: 219). In the main though, straightforward progression rather than 'churning' is encouraged. However, this does not mean that access to particular qualification routes is rationed in terms of differential entry barriers between academic and vocational courses (McDonald and

Lucas, 2001: 221). Furthermore, that there is equality of treatment in terms of time and resources put into GNVQ and A level courses is questionable.

For HE progression, these studies tentatively suggest that choices and decisions are not necessarily within the realms of individuals and families, communities and class factions. Educational institutions have their own priorities and constraints, making decisions on the basis of both funding and reputation. Although, of course, these decisions can be influenced by various interest groups the relative autonomy of educational institutions, albeit under constraints, is a valuable facet to the HE decision making (or rationing) process.

## 2.5. CONCLUSION:TOWARDS A MODEL OF HE PROGRESSION

In this chapter, I have explored three alternative perspectives on HE choice, decision making or rationing. Human capital theory is perhaps the closest to a pure model of 'choice' being based on the costs and benefits of one decision as opposed to another. Although this simplicity has led to some valid criticisms – not least that it abstracts the individual from their social context – it is also a strength. The human capital framework is adaptable, able to incorporate new elements into its basic theoretical framework (Blaug, 1992: 218). It is also intimately concerned with the material nature of individual's choices and the economic consequences of future actions. This material is often missing from cultural (and other) capital theories, particularly those exemplified by the 'new class paradigm' where there is a danger of neglecting both



institutions and the economic costs of HE for working class students. Both of these theories of 'capital' as located within the individual and the family have also been placed within a structuralist critique of agency. Although structural Marxism does not necessarily offer a route to understanding 'rationing' or 'tracking' a number of institutional studies indicate that educational institutions have an important role in structuring decisions. The role of educational institutions in 'rationing' education has been missing from much recent work on human capital theory and the 'new class paradigm' in the sociology of education.

Each of these theories operates within its own disciplinary and methodological history. Human capital theory is rooted in methodological individualism and reliant on quantitative evidence for support. Cultural and other capital theories have a basis in a more phenomenological approach, stressing individual experience, albeit with reference to class, gender and ethnicity. Institutional theories generally use a mixed methods approach and rely on case studies. It is therefore at present problematic to arrive at an overall conclusion as to the status of each approach regarding HE progression – each illuminates a different facet of that process. Despite this, there is entrenchment not only by human capital theorists but also amongst those who consider cultural and other forms of capital to represent the dominant paradigm. This is not necessarily helpful given that *neither* body of work pays sufficient attention to institutional constraints rather than economic and cultural considerations at the level of individuals and their families. I consider, therefore, that there are a number of ways to usefully progress in an inter-disciplinary and holistic fashion.

The first is the construction of hybrid theories, incorporating elements of pre-existing theories into others. The prime example of this in the field of HE progression is Boudon's (1974) Rational Action Theory (RAT). Boudon (1974) and latterly Goldthorpe (1996) provide a culturalist explanation of educational progression within the framework of rational choice, rather than classed habitus. According to both authors, it is self-selection that is responsible for the low participation rate of working class students in HE. As in human capital theory, individuals make decisions on the basis of perceived costs and benefits. However, rather than focus on labour market outcomes, both authors emphasise the psychological costs and risk of transgressing class boundaries. For many working class students, the costs involved in moving across class boundaries and losing social contacts with their families are hypothesised to outweigh the benefits of HE. Goldthorpe (1996) refers to this as a secondary effect of education as opposed to access to resources and examination achievement which represent primary effects. Hence, rational action theories represent a special case of culturalist theories in that even if individuals had the resources necessary to progress to HE, their assessment of the psychic costs and benefits mitigates against this.

This theory is intuitively appealing as it avoids the need for reference to constraints and structural determinants that prevent individuals from following certain patterns of behaviour (Hatcher, 1998). From both a theoretical and empirical standpoint, though, it is less satisfactory. As with human capital theory, the manner in which individuals preferences are initially determined is not specified. In human capital explanations of

HE progression, the assessment of costs and benefits is taken to be conducted in a similar manner across all individuals. Similarly, in RAT, the manner in which costs and benefits are analysed is similar *within social classes*. Neither theory explains how these decision making mechanisms are acquired by individuals. For rational action theories the assertion that decision making mechanisms differ across classes additionally implies some further culturalist or even structuralist theorising concerning the manner in which families, communities and/or the education system are implicated. How is it, for example, that whole classes (particularly the working class) come to value costs and benefits in a similar manner?

Empirically there are also problems in testing RAT given its reliance on a cost-benefit framework. If rational action theorists are serious concerning the application of cost-benefit analysis to education then this implies the monetisation of associated costs and benefits. These would include costs such as risk and the psychological costs of crossing class barriers. As progress towards attaching a monetary value to non-pecuniary costs and benefits is both recent and tentative in the economics of education then a quantitative test of RAT would seem to be distant, although Gambetta (1997) has related working class perceptions of risk to the decision not to proceed with HE.

As a 'hybrid theory', there are some theoretical and empirical issues with RAT as a valid alternative approach to either human or cultural capital theories. However, the theory does have some merit in entwining rationality within a cultural frame, rather

than largely abandoning it as with Bourdieu's 'habitus'. An alternative approach to hybridisation is eclecticism, which could be caricatured as a post-structuralist view of the disutility of 'grand narratives' in explaining individual destinies. In practice, declared eclecticism is not as transparent as authors declare. For example, Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) stress the importance of social class in individual trajectories but are suspicious of 'overburdened representations' of youth (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000: 142). Rather, there are many factors implicated in trajectories to HE, or other routes, and these are '...complex, fluid and fractured' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000: 151). Despite this call for eclecticism, there are also a number of standard critiques of human capital theory as a '...calculative, instrumental, abstract and generalised conception of learning' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000: 9). In addition, the authors balance their call for eclecticism with a grounding of their work within a framework of social class as highly important in structuring youth transitions. Eclecticism, in this case, does not necessarily imply a fall into relativism with all influences being equally important, or irrelevant. Indeed, in a recent conceptual development Ball (2003b) has indicated that institutional orderings (rationing), policy and family influences work *together* as 'interlocking inequalities'.

The third, and less frequently pursued approach is contingency working towards an understanding of when various mechanisms of rational choice, cultural 'habitus' and institutional rationing might operate. For example, Bourdieu concedes that although the habitus is the prime locus of individual decision making, there are some cases in

which individuals may return to the use of rational cost-benefit calculation. Certain individuals, probably those of the upper middle classes may exceptionally have ‘..the complete information, and the skill to appreciate it’ (Bourdieu, 1990b: 63).

Moreover, in discussion with Wacquant (1989) Bourdieu states that in ‘times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed ‘rational choice’ often appears to take over’ (1989: 45). It is therefore plausible that when levels of consumer debt are high, and the costs of HE increasing, that individuals may adopt a more careful cost-benefit analysis when considering their destinies although a ‘crucial proviso’ is that ‘it is habitus itself that commands this option’ (Wacquant, 1989: 45). Hence the extent to which cultural or economic considerations are dominant is contingent on other personal or policy factors although cultural factors still play a part. Similarly, the ability of institutions to pursue rationing is contingent upon both the market conditions in which they operate and the power of various class factions to challenge this process. Again, this might mean that rationing is more prevalent in areas where institutions possess a virtual monopoly on their intake, or in predominantly working class areas. The strength of this contingent approach is its sensitivity to local, policy and historical conditions.

The problem in choosing between a single disciplinary paradigm, or from a hybrid, eclectic or contingent approach (which offers more in terms of empirical purchase) is the lack of genuine inter-disciplinary research in this field (as noted by Quinn, 2003), spanning both the economics and sociology of education. In addition, the application

of a genuine mixed methodology to explore these issues is similarly absent. In the next chapter, I map out how these issues might be resolved through such methods.

## **CHAPTER 3: A MIXED METHODS STRATEGY FOR INVESTIGATING PROGRESSION FROM FURTHER TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **3.1. INTRODUCTION**

The focal question of this research is why (or why not) FE students progress to HE.

As shown in the first chapter, the government's widening participation agenda focuses on the 16-19 age group, many of whom are taught in FE colleges.

Additionally, amongst those students targeted for widening participation – working class and ethnic minority students – many of these attend FE colleges of the more general type, or sixth form (SF) colleges. Although the DfES have an extremely basic model of student behaviour, focusing on low aspirations as reasons for not attending HE, there are a number of more sophisticated approaches to this decision.

As I have shown in the last chapter, theories from the economics and sociology of education emphasise the role of various capitals, rationality or habitus and institutions in the decisions which students make. Much of this research involves students in the 16-19 age group, although it should be mentioned that there is other research dealing with the entry of mature students into HE both using quantitative (Bynner, 2001) and qualitative approaches (Davey and Jamieson, 2003).

From the discussion in Chapters 1 and 2, a number of research questions arise involving the role of both capitals and of institutions in the decision making process.

As well as higher order research questions dealing with assessing the adequacy of theoretical models (such as human capital theory), there are related questions (such as the impact of debt on the HE decision) and questions which arise in the process of research (such as the application of qualitative techniques in assessing human capital theory). These are discussed at the start of this chapter. I then set out a number of important qualifications regarding the terms of this research. Progression from FE to HE involves an operationalisation of each of these terms and I set out, as far as possible, the boundaries of each.

As an overall research strategy I then explain how a truly inter-disciplinary strategy involving mixed methods is the best approach to these research questions. Attempts to shoehorn theories into inappropriate methodologies have not necessarily led to the best solution and a range of methodologies is desirable in order to investigate educational progression. This research therefore involves a layered analysis examining the various layers (Ecclestone, 2002: 10-11) and agents (micro and meso institutional) involved in progression – using multiple methods. In practice, this means a focusing down from survey research which captures the importance of various elements in the HE decision, through interviews with individual students, to an ethnographic study of a select group of students within one college. Through this procedure I capture not only the individual and familial influences on progression, but also institutional actions and perspectives from managers and lecturers.



As a word of caution, I would remind the reader that despite the scope and coverage of this study it can only hope to be exploratory. Given that both time and resources were limited (for the entire length of the study I was working as a full time lecturer in a sixth form college with a non-supportive management) there are material constraints on things such as sample size and visits to other institutions. However, there are merits in these kinds of insider studies (in particular ethnographies) which I will discuss later in the chapter.

### 3.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the ‘capital’ paradigm has achieved some dominance in both the economics of education (human capital theory) and in the ‘new class paradigm’ work on progression to HE (cultural and other capital forms).

However, a critique of both of these approaches can be seen in an institutional perspective which takes the commoditisation of students, as well as the college’s own status as an actor, as an influence on future destinations. Given these concerns, there are a number of research questions, and sub-questions which arise.

Firstly, to *what extent is progression to HE based on an assessment of monetary costs and benefits by individuals?* As shown in the last chapter, human capital theory is not necessarily a degenerative paradigm (Blaug, 1992: 218) and there is potential for a new corroboration of the theory through work on the predictive power of ex-ante returns to HE as shown by work in other countries (Menon, 1997 and Hung, Chung and Sui-Chu Ho, 2000). One key question in this thesis is *whether the ex-ante return*

*to HE is a predictor of not only the individual's intention to enter HE (as Menon, 1997 and Hung, Chung and Sui-Chu Ho, 2000) test, but also of their behaviour in terms of an actual application to HE. There is also an issue of whether specific costs of HE, for example expected student debt, dissuade students from undertaking HE.*

As stated in the last chapter, an intention of the thesis is to examine a 'phenomenology of the human capital investment markets' (Kileen, Turton, Diamond, Donson and Wach, 1999: 101) rather than examine costs and benefits in purely monetary terms. This means investigating the particular meaning of costs and benefits to individuals in terms of their meaning in the individual's life. In particular, *how their biography within a given class position effects their understanding of the consequences of various costs and benefits of HE.* There might, for example, be differing class perceptions of the consequences of debt. For example, Connor and Dewson (2001) found that 80% of the working class students which they surveyed would not be prepared to get into debt for education whereas middle class students and their families are much more likely to treat the costs of education in an instrumental fashion (Ball, 2003a: 109).

The second, but related research question is to analyse the *influence of symbolic capitals and the habitus of individuals and their families on HE progression.* The 'new class paradigm' (Savage, 2003) re-works Bourdieu's theories of capital and habitus in examining individual and familial practices with regard to HE. I will investigate *how various forms of capital – cultural, economic and social – are used and exchanged to facilitate progression to HE.* Moreover, *the role of the habitus in*

terms of middle class expectations that it is 'natural' to progress to HE, or working class expectations that it is not a natural progression route, will be assessed.

As discussed in the previous chapter, in the current manifestation of these capital paradigms the role of institutional considerations is rarely explicit. The rejection of structuralism more generally, and structural Marxism in particular, has led to an *under-determination* of the subject. One aim of the research, then, is to investigate *how the rationing of subjects and opportunities by FE and SF colleges affects progression to HE*. Obviously, such a question involves the examination of both *why* and *whether colleges ration access to courses and opportunities* to students in the first place.

These three issues – the adequacy of human capital theory, symbolic capitals and the 'habitus' and the institutional influences on students – are at the heart of this thesis. However, there are some additional concerns which also arise from these issues. At the conceptual level is the issue of how these influences operate together. At the end of the last chapter, I discussed how hybrid theory (the working of theories together), eclecticism (borrowing elements from each) and contingency (understanding when theories might operate in different circumstances) were possible future directions for research. Therefore aside from assessing the comparative worth of various theories in understanding progression to HE I also aim, if not to generate new theory, to *conceptualise how 'capital' and institutional explanations might work together in explaining progression to HE*. There are also methodological issues arising from this

thesis in terms of the *extent to which new methodologies – in particular qualitative approaches to the economics of education – may be usefully employed.*

### **3.2.1 Marking the boundaries**

Although the ‘cut’ in making progression from FE to HE could appear to be cleanly delineated, there are a number of boundary issues and clarifications which need to be made. Although Paczuska’s (1999: 108) contention that ‘FE and HE are no longer separate’ has some merit, there are important legal, funding and status distinctions between the sectors.

Turning first to FE, the boundaries of the sector are not necessarily clear. In terms of provision, the number of 16-19 year olds studying in FE colleges is greater than those in schools (Green and Lucas, 1999: 29). Part of the FE sector, sixth form (SF) colleges, specialises in academic education targeted at entry to HE (Robinson, 2000: 176-201) whereas the majority of the sector specialises in the education of adults. In terms of HE, there is similar ambiguity. Although universities have a separate legal status and function to FE colleges there is a blurring of the boundary in terms of various franchising, merger and other joint activities – 13% of HE is now delivered in FE colleges (Paczuska, 1999: 87). There is also less of a legal distinction between the former polytechnics and other universities following their devolution from local authority control arising from the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. This does not necessarily mean, though, that these new universities have the same status and prestige of the ‘old’ (pre-1992) universities

either within the sector (Salter and Tapper, 1994: 65) or amongst students (Archer, 2003a: 128-130).

Given these blurred boundaries there are two ways in which progression from FE to HE will be defined in the thesis. Most commonly, this will be in terms of a movement between institutions from an FE or SF college to enrolment in an HEI. This does not necessarily mean that the student will be following a degree level course – they may possibly following a HND or other entry level certificate. However, there is also the potential for students to move on to HE within their FE or SF colleges through partnership or franchise arrangements. This means that they may be studying for a higher level qualification, in partnership with an HEI, within their existing institution. Although these two situations will exemplify most cases of progression, it is probably better to consider a number of progression(s) rather than progression. Qualitatively, there are important distinctions between different progression routes and sensitivity to local differences in each college is of importance.

### **3.2.2 An inter-disciplinary, mixed-method approach**

As the investigated outcome of this research then, progression between institutions clearly has qualitative as well as quantitative dimensions. In simple terms, whether individuals have transferred between institutions could be expressed as a simple binary variable. They have either made the transition or not. Other types of transition between FE and HE could be expressed in more sophisticated forms (for example, using an additional categorical variable to distinguish between pre and post-

1992 universities) and there are clearly phenomenological elements to these transitions in terms of the meaning to the individual of the transition.

The distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches to the factors influencing transitions to HE should also be apparent from the literature in the previous chapter. Whilst human capital theorists commonly use quantitative approaches to test whether economic expectations influence progression to HE (Menon, 1997 and Hung, Chung and Sui-Chu Ho, 2000), those interested in the application of Bourdieu's ideas to this issue tend to use (qualitative) ethnographic or biographical techniques (Ball, 2003a, Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999; Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Power, Edwards, Whitty and White, 2003). Although these researchers are probably using the appropriate methodology for their particular research question the research becomes problematic when judgments are made outside of their disciplinary paradigm. In studies in the 'new class paradigm' (Savage, 2003), for example, qualitative research rarely reveals that human capital theory is relevant to the decision making process (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000: 9-10; Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001). However, although individuals may have difficulties in rationalising their intentions in terms of economic costs and benefits in an interview, survey techniques may enable them to do so. Similarly, the treatment of other capitals such as social capital in the economics of education (Ludwig, 1999) tends to treat it as somewhat essentialist (of value in itself rather than of symbolic value). This static treatment fails to appreciate the ways in which 'capitals' are employed as symbolic and dynamic assets by different class factions. Although

qualitative longitudinal research may go some way to ascertaining how changes in capitals may affect transitions, such as progression to HE, it can never capture the arbitrary and symbolic nature of capital forms. Neither can surveys on individual human capital considerations capture the institutional constraints on decision making the 'detailed information about the processes underlying economic outcomes without which our understanding would be incomplete' (Berik, 1997: 122).

The approach in this thesis, then, is necessarily inter-disciplinary and mixed methods. It is partly an economic-sociology or a sociological economics of choice and decision making. However, it is also more than this. Although individual subjectivity is important, so too is the real existence of objective structures above the individual. Educational institutions are more than the aggregate of individual actions and behaviours. Whilst an institution is made up of individuals and competing interests, they possess relatively greater power than most individual micro-actors making this a more appropriate unit for economic-sociology (Zey, 1998: 103-109). Similarly, although individuals may (or more commonly may not) have a subjective affiliation to a social class group there is a material basis to class. This is not only in terms of relative income and wealth, or occupational position, but the commonality of the experience of most subjects in this thesis (middle and working class) of having to ultimately sell their labour power in order to survive. Although capitals may be symbolic, they are ultimately rooted in economic capital and inequality (Bourdieu, 1986).

The overall approach taken is then a political economy of education rather than a simple neo-classical economic or micro-sociological approach, although these approaches also inform the thesis. That there is a material reality underlying individual subjectivity and that institutions can be decision makers aside from individuals implies a critical realist approach, examining the underlying phenomena, including power structures and inequalities, which underpin empirical findings (Baert, 1998: 193-197). This approach resonates with Bourdieu's stress on the dialectic between objective structures and subjective experience realised in the habitus, as I have shown in the last chapter. Considerations of power and why (as well as how) resources are distributed in a certain manner are therefore part of this thesis ultimate concern with social justice in terms of class inequality in HE participation. That these considerations may be connected with the realm of subjectivity, cultural and other symbolic capitals does not dampen this position, rather it is an attempt to '...take political economy seriously in the cultural realm' (Willis, 2000: 122).

An inter-disciplinary mixed methods approach to the research does not mean that there will be one methodology attached to investigating each research question. There are some possibilities for investigating cultural and other capital 'proxies' quantitatively. Indeed, in *Distinction* for example, (Bourdieu, 2003) survey techniques are employed in an examination of the cultural capital of different class factions (although I reject a similar survey in this research for reasons which will be explained below). There is also the possibility of applying qualitative methods in



economics, including the economics of education. Although not part of the mainstream economics debate, feminist economists have been most vocal in supporting this approach (Pujol, 1997; Berik, 1997; Meagher, N., 1997). One particular advantage to this approach is that I will be able to triangulate the research findings by method. By comparing results from different methods of investigation I will be able to gain some purchase on the interpretative validity of ethnographic and other qualitative methods of research. The use of statistical analysis in the survey will also increase the validity of conclusions resulting from observation and interview (Adler and Adler, 1988: 88).

### **3.2.3 Research design**

The overall research design is based upon a multi-method approach using not only quantitative (survey) research, but also various methods of qualitative research (interview and ethnography). The collection of primary data was paramount. There is no information on the expected costs and benefits of HE in any of the major social surveys (British Household Panel Survey, Birth Cohort Studies, Labour Force Survey) and, in any case, there would be considerable (although not insurmountable) access problems in conducting qualitative research on the subjects in these studies. I will discuss reasons for the use of each specific technique in a separate section on each research methods (below). In the overall design, though, each component has both a specific and inter-related role. At the highest level of abstraction, the quantitative model arising from survey research provides a test of the importance of various individual characteristics on the HE decision. For example, the importance of human capital, or class background, in predicting an intention or application for HE.

However, this model provides little in the way of explanation of why certain factors are important. Hence in the context of this model the use of interviews provides a method of examining what it is concerning economic costs and benefits, or social class, which might be having the quantitatively established effect. Interviews and other qualitative research also provide a method of investigating Bourdieu's theories of capitals which, due to their symbolic and dynamic nature, are difficult to operationalise quantitatively. Quantitative research may be useful in treating capitals as an individual, or even relative, resource, but it is less well able to model how capitals symbolically gain (or lose) value in various fields of social life. For example, the value of educational qualifications is not static but depends upon the relations of power in a particular field (Bourdieu, 2003: 80-96). Attempts to quantify or essentialise these capitals through quantitative measurement (such as DeGraaf, 1986) are therefore misguided 'It would be wholly mistaken to locate in any one of these factors...(educational level and social origin)....an "efficacy" which only appears in a certain relationship and may therefore be cancelled out or inverted in another field or another state of the same field' (Bourdieu, 2003: 94, my addition in brackets). Finally, ethnographic research provides a focal study of how these factors operate dynamically and in the lived experiences of the subjects within an educational institution. This can examine how both personal and institutional factors might be involved in processes of transfer between FE and HE.

Given that there are a number of possible individual and institutional factors which might influence the progression of students from FE to HE, I decided to pursue this

mixed methods investigation across a number of sites. As discussed above, the exploratory nature of this research meant that there was a limit to the number of colleges and students who could be included in the sample. In order to examine both the commonality and diversity of institutional responses to HE progression, three colleges with a variety of diverse characteristics were chosen. Given the resource limitations and that primary data collection and qualitative research were to be conducted in each site, three sites provided the opportunity of investigating both commonality and diversity of experience with regard to progression to HE across sites. Therefore, colleges were purposively selected in order to provide contrasting dimensions of the sector in terms of institutional characteristics and student population. Although funding and conditions of incorporation are almost identical for both FE and SF colleges there are historical reasons for assuming that there are differences between the organisational cultures and student intakes between them. In the choice of cases, both SF and FE colleges were represented. Colleges were also selected on the basis of student ethnic and social class mix and the percentage of students who entered HE.

In arriving at a final choice of sites, there were some access requirements for the research. In a salient example of the commoditisation of FE students, one college refused access for research as 'the expectations of our students are valuable market information'. However, as I worked as a lecturer in FE during the research period I was able to make use of professional and social contacts to gain access to three colleges (which as in the case of all data in this study, have been suitably

anonymised) – West Essex, Colne and Thameside. West Essex was a general FE college with a high intake of ethnic minority students, a small proportion of which entered HE. Colne was a SF college with a high intake of white, middle class students, a large proportion of which entered HE. Thameside was a SF college with a high intake of white working class students, a small proportion of which entered HE. Statistics for student intake and HE progression were obtained from FEFC inspection reports. All of the colleges were in the same area of the United Kingdom: Essex. The choice of this area of this study is not only for pragmatic reasons (I worked at one of the colleges and had contacts in each) but also serendipitous. There are specific features of the region which make it of particular interest for study. In terms of HE participation and post-compulsory participation generally, enrollment rates in HE are relatively low, particularly given the per capita income of the County. However, within this general picture there are pockets of both high and low participation in HE compared to the mean. In particular, Thameside was early on identified as a site where intensive qualitative investigation would be undertaken. This college was sited in one of the identified ‘cool spots’ for HE enrolment by UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Survey) and was an area of relative economic and social deprivation compared to the rest of the County.

Although FEFC data was used in the selection of colleges, this disaggregated data is not used in this thesis for reasons of confidentiality. It would be relatively easy to use this disaggregated data, and FEFC inspection reports, to identify the colleges selected in the study. Alongside the use of pseudonyms for both colleges and respondents the

omission of disaggregated data was one method of preserving anonymity for both institutions and individuals.

However, aggregated FEFC data provides some idea of the proportions and characteristics of students studying in colleges more generally during this time. In general FE colleges such as West Essex, there were 327,100 students studying for level 3 courses in 1998 / 99 of whom 26% were studying for GNVQ and 51% for A level (FEFC, 2000a: 15). The overall numbers studying for level 3 courses in SFC such as Colne and Thameside was 204,900 of whom 4% were studying for GNVQ and 87% for A levels (FEFC, 2000a: 17). These numbers partly reflect differences in prior GCSE attainment between college types. In SFC 70.8% of students had 5 GCSEs at grades A-C whereas only 25% of students in FE had this level of attainment in 1998 (FEFC, 2000b: 17).

In general, retention and achievement (successful completion) rates for general FE colleges are not as good as those for SFC. For level 3 courses (mainly A level and GNVQ) the achievement rate in general FE colleges was 72% (FEFC, 2000a: 15) as compared to 84% in SFC in 1998 / 99 (FEFC, 2000a: 17). The retention rate in general FE for level 3 courses was 77% (FEFC, 2000a: 15) as compared to 78% in SFC (FEFC, 2000a: 17). However, it must be remembered that these aggregated figures disguise the diversity of SF and general FE colleges. In terms of achievement and retention at A level and GNVQ, for example, Thameside's figures were closer to those of West Essex than Colne.

In terms of individual cases, I decided to focus upon students studying business courses at both GNVQ and A level. Business represents the programme area most frequently studied by 16-19 year olds in FE and was well represented in each of the colleges studied. In addition, the opportunity existed to contrast the HE intentions of vocational (GNVQ) and non-vocational (A level) students as well as the manner in which course allocation influenced their future HE choices. There was only one other course for which both GNVQ and A level routes exist (Media) and here student numbers are small. In addition, as I was a teacher of Business Studies, access to students and staff in the focal College (Thameside) was relatively unproblematic.

Certain aspects of sample selection, then, were determined by the desire to qualitatively probe in depth characteristics of area, institution type and route (A level or GNVQ) on student progression. Within this framework sampling, sample size and explanatory power were considered. In terms of sampling, some randomisation was achieved by sampling alternate A level and GNVQ business classes in each institution although one could not be sure that allocation to classes was truly random (particularly given the evidence in Chapters 5 and 6). As the technique of logistic regression was used in the quantitative modelling of the dichotomous HE decision (Kleinbaum, 1994), difficulties may arise when there are too many predictor, or independent, variables (which in the model proposed are the IRR, social class, prior attainment and ethnicity) compared to the number of cases (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996: 579). Tabachnick and Fidell (1996: 132) propose that as a simple rule,  $104 +$

m (where m is the number of independent variables) is adequate. Given four independent variables, 108 cases are at least sufficient and in practice, over 150 cases were used. Within these quantitatively investigated cases, a smaller number of cases were identified for further qualitative study. The sampling considerations for these qualitative cases are discussed in the sections on interview and ethnographic research given below.

In deciding upon the temporal dimensions of the research, a longitudinal, rather than purely cross-sectional, design was chosen. In a cross-sectional design, individuals are investigated (by survey, observation or interview) at one period of time. For example, in the interviews conducted by Leathwood and Hutchings (2003), Archer and Hutchings (2000) and Reay (1998) we obtain a 'slice' of individual experience at one point of time, albeit contextualised by biographical detail. Although this biographical approach is of value in terms of the richness of detail obtained it inevitably fixes the various dispositions and 'capitals' of the individual at the current point in time. Past events and future expectations are hence seen through the lens of current experience. However, that individual perspectives change (their habitus) as do the value of various forms of capital is mostly lost in this approach. Longitudinal interview or ethnographic approaches are much more powerful in this respect (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001; Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999; Bloomer, 1997; Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000; Skeggs, 1997). Moreover, considerations of causality are easier to address in longitudinal research. In cross-sectional studies everything happens (or at least is observed) at once. This means it is hard to disentangle what is

cause and what is effect. This particularly applies to quantitative studies. For example, in both Menon (1997) and Hung, Chung and Sui-Chu Ho (2000) individuals declare their ex-ante expectations at the same time as their intention to enter HE. It is therefore possible that the intention to enter HE influences their ex-ante expectation through some form of post-hoc rationalisation. However, by following a longitudinal design in which a behaviour (such as an actual application to university) follows an ex-ante intention then some sense of causality can be established. Users of ex-post data on the HE decision have similarly advocated the use of longitudinal data in order to establish the sequential nature in which educational decisions are taken (Weiler, 1994).

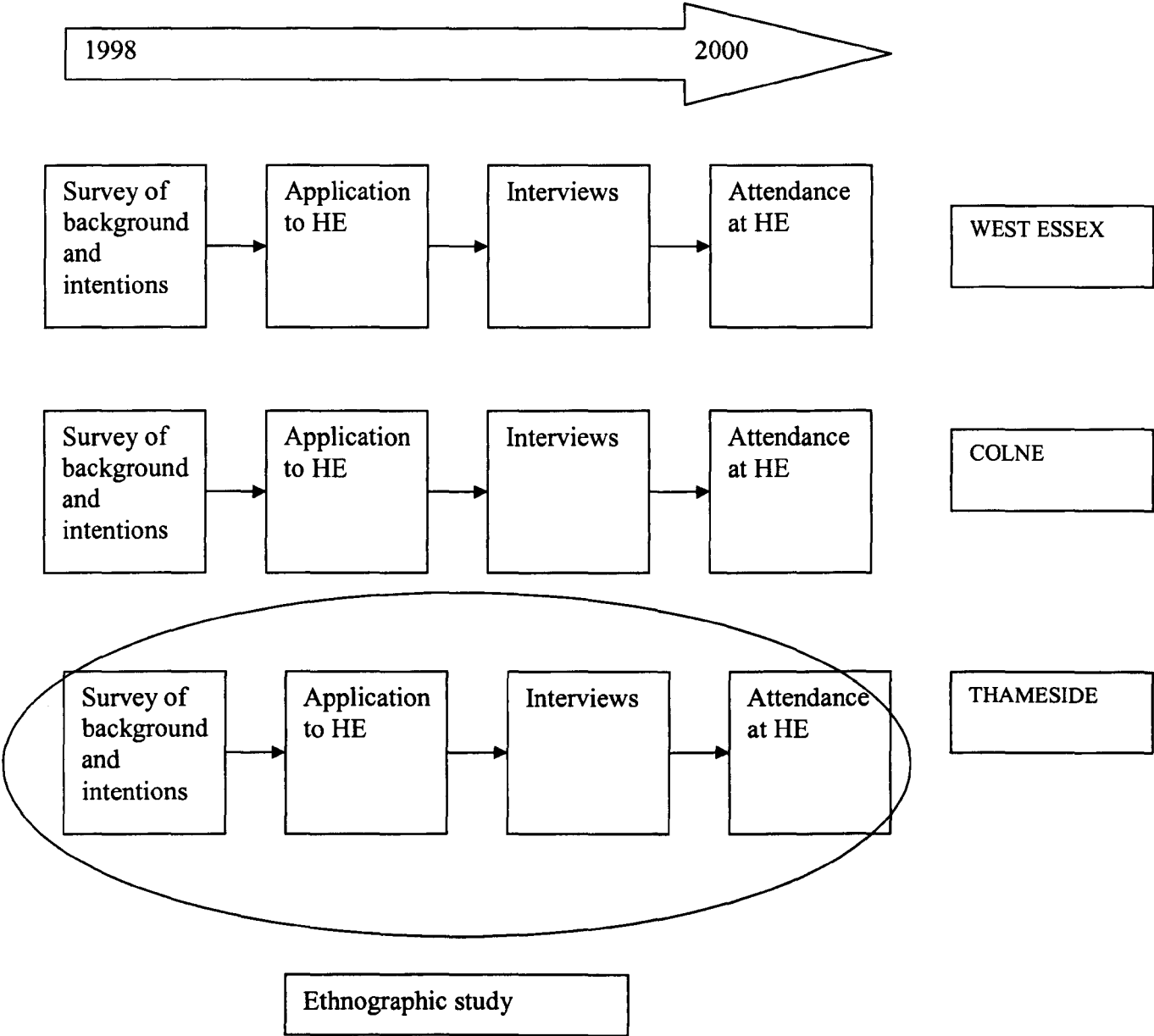
Therefore in this study, a longitudinal design was followed in both the collection of survey and event history data in addition to ethnographic components of the study over a two year period (1998-2000). This allowed an analysis of the progress of students through FE with regard to their initial intentions regarding HE, how those intentions change over time and subsequent behaviours with regard to HE (applications and attendance in HE). Ideally, such a longitudinal approach would also have been adopted for the interviews but resource constraints prevented a series of interviews being conducted in each college. Therefore, as a second best solution, biographical interviews with students and staff in each of the colleges were conducted after the decision to apply (or not) to HE had been taken. Ideally, this combination of a longitudinal design for the quantitative and ethnographic data with a single cross-sectional group of interviews would have been combined with a series of interviews



over time. Pragmatically, this was not possible given time and resource constraints; hence the cross-sectional interviews were embedded in the longitudinal design. Even given this limitation, I was still able to triangulate interview findings with the other data.

Diagram 1 (below) shows the temporal dimensions of the study and the sequencing of the research activity in each of the three colleges (West Essex, Colne and Thameside). At the start of their course, students were given a questionnaire in order to ascertain their background characteristics. After establishing background data and intentions regarding HE, an event history was constructed for each student of whether they applied to HE and whether they attended HE. This was supplemented by information regarding the *type* of institution in each case in order to ascertain differences between decisions regarding universities which were established pre as opposed to post-1992. To follow up initial results of the survey and event history, interviews were conducted in each institution in late 1999 after most applications to HE had been made. In addition to this research activity in each of the colleges, Thameside is identified as a site for more focal ethnographic research. I will now outline the constituent elements of this diagram and my research in terms of the form and uses of survey data, biographical interviews and ethnography employed.

**Diagram 1: Temporal dimensions of the study**



### **3.3. OUTLINE OF METHODS AND ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES**

#### **3.3.1 The ‘broad brush’: the longitudinal survey and its analysis**

In this study, surveys were used to obtain information regarding background information on the subjects, their expectations regarding returns to education and their intentions regarding HE. The survey used is given in Appendix 1. The use of surveys was justified in terms of data collection and disclosure. Surveys enable the collection of a large quantity of information on each subject in a timely and cost-effective manner when compared with interviews. In the current study, college records were initially considered as a source of background information on respondents. However, they would not have been sufficient for the purposes of collecting detailed information on student expectations or details of their social backgrounds. In addition, surveys enable the respondent to supply information in a relatively private manner, which may increase the validity of the subject's response. In one US study, CASI (computer-assisted self administered interview) has been successfully trialled as a method of eliciting earnings expectations in a private manner (Manski and Domintz, 1996). In this case, such technology was not available although disclosure was minimised in the current study as surveys were privately administered by the researcher so that subjects could not discuss the results with others.

Prior to the administration of surveys in the field, pilot surveys were conducted with students who would not form part of the study in early 1998. Twenty students were

involved in the piloting of the survey, commenting in writing on the survey design. A group discussion was subsequently held with students participating in the pilots in order to further explore issues arising from their comments. A number of modifications were made to the survey following the pilot, and these are discussed in the following discussion of survey design.

There were several purposes of the surveys used in the current study. Obviously, one objective of the survey was to collect background information on subjects. With regard to this, it was decided to concentrate on those variables which have been implicated in HE enrollments. Hence, subjects were asked to provide information on variables previously identified as influencing progression such as parental socio-economic status (McIntosh, 2001; HEFCE, 1998), parental education (Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles, 2003: 11), ethnicity (Modood and Shiner, 1994) and previous qualifications (McIntosh, 2001). Gender was also included for contextualisation. It has been found to have no necessary effect on the HE decision, although there are differences in participation in course type amongst men and women (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997: 9). As stated above, I decided not to ask specific questions designed to measure the cultural or other capitals of the student. That is, their consumption and production of cultural activities such as visiting art galleries, writing poetry or valuable social contacts. Although these factors have been implicated in HE progression, there is substantial multicollinearity with parental occupation, so there is a degree of redundancy in such an exercise. Moreover, the degree to which cultural capital can be operationalised as a stock of individual cultural assets is questionable.

As explained above, the dynamics of the valuation of cultural capital and its exchange for educational qualifications is best studied in the educational context through ethnographic or other qualitative techniques. The operationalisation of social background in the quantitative study was through class as embodied both in parental occupation (using the Registrar-General's scheme as described in Crompton, 1998: 59 as explained in the next chapter) and (partly) in past academic performance. However, in the interview and ethnographic research a more dynamic understanding of class-as-process (Skeggs, 1997; Ball, 2003a) involving the ownership and use of various forms of capital was possible.

On the first page of the survey in Appendix 1, a short request from myself explained the content of the survey and assures the respondent as to the confidentiality of their responses. This statement also explains that data obtained in the survey, and follow up data, will subsequently be used for further research. This statement is to reassure the respondent as to the purpose of the survey and that ethical considerations have been met, thus aiming increasing the response rate.

Central to the design of the survey was a need to ascertain student expectations of the returns to educational qualifications. Despite the burgeoning number of ex-ante studies, there has been little discussion concerning the adequacy of techniques for measuring future expectations. Bosworth and Ford (1985) comment on this lack of methodological analysis and provide some discussion of alternative methodologies employed. The first broad method is to ask respondents to estimate their earnings

given opposing educational futures. In the current case, this would be whether they would have entered HE or not. The second method is to ask the individual what they would have earned at this point in time at various ages given differing educational qualifications. Bosworth and Ford claim that the second method is preferable as there is no need for concern as to whether the respondent understands the difference between real and nominal income. This is because the respondent is asked to estimate income at one point in time.

In the current study the first method was employed. That is, respondents were asked to estimate future real income at various ages. Asking respondents to estimate incomes for a variety of otherwise identical individuals of different ages at one time point would not have provided a valid measure of the ex-ante rate of return. This is because the earnings thereby estimated would be influenced by the perceived state of the economy at that time. In a recession, it might be expected that individuals are likely to estimate lower earnings for all individuals, whatever their level of education. Hence lifetime earnings estimated through this method would be upwardly or downwardly biased depending upon the current state of the economy. In addition, the objections of Bosworth and Ford (1985) to the first method may be overstated. I found that subjects in the pilot had no difficulty in understanding the consequences of inflation for their future income.

The first ten questions in the survey ascertain background information concerning social background, ethnicity, gender and prior qualifications. Questions 12 and 13

ask for the student's future HE intentions. Expected costs and benefits of HE are elicited through questions 11 and 14 which ask respondents to estimate their real net income at various ages. Net rather than gross income was asked as this would mean that no adjustments for taxes and benefits would have to be made. Ex-ante gross income would yield a perceived social rate of return, which is of little conceptual use. Moreover, in adjusting perceived gross to perceived net income it would have to be assumed that individuals expected existing tax and benefit structures to remain the same unless individuals were asked specific questions regarding future taxes and benefits.

In some studies (Williams and Gordon, 1981; Menon, 1997) it is assumed that individual earnings peak at a certain age on the basis of ex-post data. This means that a small number of observations are required to ascertain the ex-ante rate of return. For example, if earnings are expected to peak at 37, then observations may be taken at 21, 37 and 65 in order to construct an age-earnings profile. However, there are no obvious reasons for assuming that future earnings profiles will follow the same shape as past profiles and in the current study respondents were asked to supply information on expected earnings at five yearly intervals (Ages 18, 23, 28, 33, 38, 43, 48, 53, 58 and 63). This allowed for the expression of unorthodox earnings functions, such as those which are flat or those which have more than one peak.

From the pilot study, no student expressed that their real net income would be greater than £80,000 or less than £5,000, hence the upper and lower boundaries were set to

allow for preferences slightly exceeding these limits. It was decided to apportion income boundaries at £3,000 intervals so that respondents had a wide range of income boundaries in which to make their decision, without risking the confusion of too many possible responses.

Questions 13 and 15 are designed to elicit further background information concerning possible HE intentions and expectations. Question 13 asks respondents who expect to attend HE which type of university they might attend. Local examples are provided to aid respondents in making judgements as to different types of institution. Question 15 elicits responses concerning potential student debt.

Question 16 gives the respondent an opportunity to comment on their future career path through an open question. The survey concludes with a chance for respondents to make an open comment on any further issues.

The surveys were administered by the researcher to students in each class. This method was employed to increase the response rate by subjects, and also to ensure that the surveys were completed individually. As not all students would be present when the surveys were administered, any which were not completed were left with the class teacher to give to the student on their return. This procedure was followed in order to reduce non-response bias, particularly as absent students may have different motivational characteristics than attendees on that day.



Following the survey, an event history for each student was created covering three time periods – the intention to apply to HE (recorded at the time when students completed the survey), whether they subsequently applied to HE (by December 1999) and whether they attended HE (by the end of 2000) using additional data supplied by the colleges. At each of these times, I also determined the type of university which students had applied to and attended (pre or post 1992). Using data on the intentions, applications and attendance at HE as independent variables and the IRR and social characteristics as dependent variables allowed a series of logistic models (Kleinbaum, 1994) of the decision making process to be created. The details of how this model was created are given in the next chapter. The results of the logistic model were used to clarify the importance of various factors involved in student progression to HE which subsequently informed the interview and ongoing ethnographic research.

### **3.3.2 Decision making in individual lives: biographical interviews**

A year after the initial survey research follow-up, interviews were conducted with both students and staff in each of the three colleges. By this stage (late 1999), most students would have applied to HE if it was their intention to enter by the year 2000. Hence the interviews were timed so that the process by which an intention to enter HE (or not) was realised (or not) as a behaviour. Moreover, the factors influencing these processes could be discussed with students. As both a triangulation of this data and in order to gather possible institutional perspectives on the process interviews were also conducted with college staff and management.

In deciding on a sampling frame, a combinatorial approach was employed in order to cover the possible range of student background characteristics in each college. A combinatorial approach – sampling by a combination of characteristics – enables one to examine the ways in which characteristics might work together in the decision making process. In this case, sampling by highest parental occupation (collapsed into two categories), ethnicity (collapsed into two categories), gender (two categories) in three colleges (three categories) gives  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3 = 24$  potential interviews which would cover all possible combinations. Alongside these background characteristics, there is also supporting data from the original survey containing both the ex-ante rates of return and intentions regarding HE which can be used to frame the interviews. Most of the interviews were individual lasting from 30-45mins, although in a few cases two respondents were interviewed together due to time limitations imposed by the colleges. Although this was not necessarily desirable in that disclosure may have been reduced, it produced a more dialogic than biographical structure to these interviews. In this dialogue issues were raised between students which I did not necessarily anticipate. For example, the importance of friendship groups for working class boys in making a collective decision to apply to HE.

The basic structure of the interviews with students was biographical (Erben, 1998) although the point of entry into the individual's biography was central. Rather than start with an open life history narrative, the interview was focussed on a specific decision, being the application (or not) to HE. Using this as a starting point in a semi-structured format the local context of the specific event was then discussed – being

the influence of family, friends, the college and the community on the decision as well as internal motivations such as economic expectations concerning HE. This local context was then related to a wider societal context in terms of views concerning the transition to HE more generally for people 'like' the student concerned. This technique of building from the specific to the more general offers both a technique of opening up the interview, facilitating student response and also a method of placing the biography of individual within a wider societal context (Erben, 1998: 6-7). It also means that the subjectivity of the individual can be discussed in a more reflexive manner, accounting for the individual's position within a framework of social and institutional structures (Preston, 2003a). Although some interviewer bias in interviewing is inevitable, I used the words and terms used by the interviewee as much as possible in the conduct of the interview. Moreover, although topic guides are often used in semi-structured interviews, no such guide was used in the conduct of these interviews in order to further facilitate student response in removing the formal distance between interviewer and interviewee. The basic structure of each interview was, though, similar in moving from the specific to the general. All interviews were taped.

Interviews were also conducted with senior managers and two lecturers in each college with responsibility for some of the students in the sample. These were semi-structured interviews with topics arising from the quantitative data, interviews with students and the emerging ethnographic findings. From each of these data sources the significance of the students' initial qualifications for subsequent FE and HE

progression was apparent. Specifically a focus in the interviews was on the process of enrolment, course choice and allocation to courses. Of particular interest in interviews with managers and staff were the ways in which access to academic courses was restricted. Given my status as a business lecturer in one of the colleges (Thameside), it was intended that the less structured nature of these interviews would facilitate a professional dialogue between myself and the interviewee, hence facilitating response and disclosure. My own social capital in terms of the ‘...mobilisation of existing social networks’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1996: 60) was a valuable resource in this process. These interviews with managers and staff were taped and transcribed.

Following transcription of the student interviews, coding of each was undertaken using categories of ‘human capital’ (costs, benefits, debt), ‘cultural capital’ (habits, dispositions, previous qualifications, concerns of ‘fitting in’ – the *habitus*), ‘social capital’ (social networks and contacts), ‘economic capital’ (wealth and income) and ‘rationing’ (institutional restrictions and constraints) were employed in the initial within-case analysis. However, new categories and clarification of existing categories was also part of this process. Hence the analysis of interviews was dialogic in that there was a dialogue between the existing literature and the data. A grounded theory approach was rejected due to the advantages of working with an existing body of theory to avoid the re-discovery of already well established themes.

Aside from triangulation with the quantitative and ethnographic data, reliability of the within case analysis was tested through alternative readings of the accounts, examining the verisimilitude of the theoretical narrative which was used to explain each case. More robustly, between-case analysis was then conducted in order to construct typologies of relationships between various individual and social characteristics and HE decisions. In order to examine the validity of these constructs, they were then applied to all cases in order to identify outliers that did not meet the criteria for inclusion in any typology. An iterative procedure meant that typologies were then reconstructed on the basis of these outliers. I have detailed how this iterative procedure can be used more generally in the analysis of biographical accounts elsewhere (Preston, 2003a).

A much looser coding structure was imposed on the interviews with senior managers and lecturers as much of the information obtained was procedural – dealing with college systems. However, there were also affective ('appropriate for our type of students') and contextual ('we've always done it that way') statements regarding student progression. Therefore, a more narrative approach was adopted, searching for commonalities and differences in the data.

A final part of the process of analysis of the interview data is the writing up of such data, which is rarely considered in qualitative techniques. The reasons for inclusion and exclusion for certain types of data and the rhetorical devices (Crapanzano, 1984) used in such writing have become of concern to writers of ethnography, but also of

interviews. Although it is not possible, or even desirable, to abstract oneself from these procedures by resorting to pseudo-scientific methods there are two appeals which can at least soften the blow of (my) author subjectivity. The first is that the reflexive approach – a discourse between theory and data – means that data becomes an active part of the research process. Rather than being ammunition in support or rejection of a theory, data is used in the construction and re-construction of existing theory. This grounds the explanation in both theory and the author's interpretation, meaning that there is at least some reason for the exclusion or inclusion of certain materials. As Willis (2000: 117) states 'Just as theory is preparation for and activity in the field, so it is important in the writing process'. Additionally, the verisimilitude of the written explanation (whether it brings readers into an identification with the life experience of the respondent) is perhaps a weaker, but valid, method of assessing the quality of explanation. The theoretical construction, or re-construction, obtained from interview can hence be re-applied to the readers own experiences, or other work (either my own or other published studies). In particular, the resonances and dissonances between the interview and ethnographic work are particularly important in assessing the validity of the findings.

### **3.3.3 Ethnography in the workplace / college**

The term ethnography has been used rather flexibly in educational research. Hammersley and Atkinson (1996) provide a cluster of techniques which comprise the ethnographic approach. These involve covert or overt observation of people's daily lives for an extended period of time and using a range of techniques to collect data - usually watching and listening, although the collection of visual or documentary

information is becoming increasingly common in educational research. The approach to data collection is often unstructured (Hammersley, 1998: 2) although there is classically more structured ethnographic fieldwork and various forms of empowerment, or social justice ethnographies. This broad definition means the boundaries of ethnography are blurred, and accounts where the observations have occurred over a short time period or where data has been gathered purely through interview are classed as ethnographic (Hammersley, 1998: 1). Boundaries are also blurred between ethnography and other disciplines such as journalism or travel writing and there can be striking parallels between the rhetorical conventions employed in journalistic and academic writing as the edited collection by Clifford and Marcus (1984) powerfully demonstrates. However, in defence of the credentials of ethnography, even mathematical economists also make use of rhetorical devices (McCloskey, 1994).

For the purposes of this study, the use of ethnographic as opposed to other qualitative techniques, such as interviews was clearly separated. Although the techniques are mutually supportive in this research and will be used in triangulation, ethnography can achieve purposes which interviews can not. Over an extended period, which must be a prerequisite for any meaningful ethnographic investigation, observations can be taken of how transitions evolve, are modified and constrained. In biographical interviewing, I gained only a limited understanding of the perspectives and actions of other actors. The researcher also absents themselves from the sense of place in which transitions are embedded. This sense of place and use of a variety of evidence is

often stated to form part of the 'richness' of ethnographic accounts as 'thick descriptions' of reality (Geertz, 1973).

In deciding to apply ethnography to the process of transition from FE to HE the journalistic tradition of the approach may be considered to be a weakness. However, in this context it may also be considered to be a strength of the approach. Although the products of FE in terms of student retention, achievement and progression figures are in the public domain, the procedures implicated in the production of these products may be obscured. Ethnographic techniques have the capacity to allow the researcher to avoid or at least subvert such institutional constraints. Parallels with investigative journalism are indicative of the liberatory power of ethnography in revealing evidence which may be unpalatable to institutions and governments. In support of this view, Avis (1994) refers to many FE ethnographies as providing an alternative discourse to policy-orientated literature on various topics.

It is often considered that ethnographers should be explicit in stating their values and in providing some autobiographical details concerning their interest in the research topic and role in the institutional setting. Hammersley (1998) proposes that ethnography should be value free and politically motivated ethnographers should declare their interests at the outset. It is naive to expect that individuals can absent themselves from their political values. It is also naive to assume that 'motiveless' ethnography is possible. The absence of an explicit political position can mean that the researcher adopts an uncritical perspective on educational processes. On the other



hand, stressing the statement of values and the autobiography of the researcher means that the focus of the work is frequently shifted from the setting to the researcher, or the researcher's relationships with the respondents. This is an interesting sub-discipline of ethnographic research and may present a challenge to traditional conceptions of ethnography (Clifford and Marcus, 1984). However, this self-revelatory turn in ethnography may be seen as a move to further the approach towards another form of autobiography, rather than a critical research approach.

As the sole researcher in this study, I was an experienced lecturer in a sixth form college, with a high degree of personal cynicism concerning the impacts of marketisation and managerialism on staff and students in the college. There are various implications of this role for the practice and interpretation of ethnography. Although students were ostensibly the primary area of study, I made no attempt to integrate within their friendship groups or to observe their cultural practices first hand – although observation of both occurred indirectly in the college and local area. This approach was partly pragmatic. There was a need to preserve professional identity within the college and I was not prepared to take on the burden of identity management involved. There are also potential ethical considerations involved in such an approach. For example, in other ethnographic accounts (Skeggs, 1997, Mac an Ghaill, 1994) strong friendships are developed between the researchers and their students, with students visiting their houses. This allows the researchers to elicit close, personal, accounts from the students. However, rapport is inevitably seductive (Hey, 2000: 162) and inevitably in these studies friendships were commodified to

produce research products. Despite the possible access limitations then, I maintained my identity as college lecturer throughout the study, although the additional status as researcher allowed respondents the space to express opinions which they may have otherwise withheld. A limitation of this status was that there would also have been censoring of certain opinions. A separate issue was relations with my colleagues and management.

Although in terms of relations with students some status distance was maintained this was not necessarily the case with my colleagues – many of whom were personal friends – and here I am guilty of trading on the consequences of good rapport (Hey, 2000). Despite the consent of all of those in the study for the use of the data, there remains a boundary issue in terms of whether this would cause them any personal discomfort were they to subsequently read these comments. In particular, the ethnographic findings do not present the management of Thameside in a particularly positive manner. Ethically, one response is ‘respondent validation’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1996: 228-229) which would be to present each individual with a copy of the research findings pertaining to them and ask them to amend my interpretation accordingly. I decided not to follow this route for two reasons. Firstly, that a feature of many good ethnographies is discomfort. The sexist and racist comments made by Willis’ (1977) lads and the reporting of the anonymous sexual encounters of Humphrey’s (1970) tea room trade are ethnographic classics which have been criticised for their ethical and (in the case of Willis) alleged anti-feminist stance. However, the reporting of unpalatable truths should be part of ethnography,

particularly if this discomfort reveals something concerning the obscured nature of power relations. Although I would not compare my own ethnography to these two classic works one ethical justification is that it reveals something concerning the nature of how FE colleges operate with respect to the progression of (particularly) working class students which otherwise would not be recorded. Secondly, that given the predilections of college management in the site in which I worked I could not guarantee that my research findings would not be censored. In adopting this stance, I concur with Epstein (1998) who refers to the need for researchers to temper concerns with ethics with a concern for the political consequences of their research. That is, the ethical codes which apply to researching subordinated groups should not necessarily apply to more powerful ones (Epstein, 1998: 38).

The focus of my ethnographic research was on a sub-sample of the original survey, being one class of GNVQ students at Thameside College who I taught in combination with other lecturers. The choice of this focal study for HE progression was due to the particular characteristics of these students. Thameside itself was located in an area of particularly low levels of HE participation, and for the (mainly) working class students studying a vocational course, the probabilities of attending HE were slim. This counter intuitive case of students who are particularly unlikely to progress to HE provides a counter-weight to 'new class paradigm' studies that are increasingly focused on those for whom HE progression is natural (Ball, 2003a). Although the same research questions apply, a qualitatively 'thicker' account can be created combining both individual and institutional factors. This allows me to investigate the

properties of the field in which capitals circulate and attain value – an area of Bourdieu's work which is increasingly overlooked in social research (Colley, 2003: 148-152). Accordingly, I explain how macro-social changes in the ways in which class and white ethnicity are deployed and valued helps us to understand these students' (lack of) transition to HE. As Colley (2003) points out, capitals are of no necessary value in themselves: power relations in the field determine what '*counts as capital*' (Colley, 2003: 149, author's italics).

### **3.3.4 Ethnographic approach and analysis**

In the ethnographic study a journal in diary form was kept on a daily basis. In keeping the journal, the focus was on the ways in which forms of cultural capital (as described by Bourdieu, 1986 as being in the embodied form: modes of behaviour, consumption and appearance and in the institutionalised form: qualifications) of students on a GNVQ course were valued by Thameside College. A related issue was how this then impacted upon progression to HE. This focus on the treatment of vocational students emerged from the quantitative and interview data in that typically students with G-scores below 5 (who were less likely to apply to HE) were allocated to courses such as GNVQ. Through interview data a focus on the *process* by which the cultural resources of students were valued by institutions emerged. This focus on the treatment of such students also emerged from the ethnography itself as I became aware of the ways in which colleagues and I treated such students. However, I decided not to use an auto-ethnographic approach for reasons discussed in the previous section.

The approaches used in obtaining the data were observation and latterly recording of data in the journal from lecturer (backroom) talk, procedural aspects of the classes / courses and management briefings. I also discussed with students their attitudes towards progression to HE at the end of their GNVQ course. Direct and formal classroom observation was not conducted due both to the artificiality of such observations and the possible conflict which this could have led to with colleagues. Of course, in writing from memory there could have been omissions and re-wording although omission and choice of quotations are inevitable in any form of qualitative analysis. To attempt to minimise this, notes were made on such conversations as close as possible to the time of the observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1996: 176). A reflexive approach was used in checking the validity of the data through an internal dialogue between theory, data and my own subjective position as lecturer in the college and researcher (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 1998: 131). Additional validity was sought through (informal) discussions with colleagues towards the end of the research process. Although colleagues did not necessarily have a conception of the macro-processes through which I claim that students' 'whiteness and class' are valued, they generally agreed that they treated GNVQ students in a different manner to others. In particular, that 'student consumption' (see below) was a particular area for control and regulation.

In the analysis of data three broad coding categories were employed. These arose from types of cultural capital (embodied and institutionalised as described by Bourdieu, 1986) and from emergent issues identified in the research (Hammersley

and Atkinson, 1996: 180). These three categories were named consumption and classification, regulation and qualification. The first category (consumption and classification) arose somewhat unexpectedly, but it soon became clear that lecturers' backroom talk about students was orientated around their appearance, bodies, behaviours and consumption. In particular, themes of excess and over-consumption emerged. The second category (regulation) was in some senses a response to the first, covering institutional responses to student culture and behaviour. The last category (qualification) covered the ways in which the GNVQ was valued by the institution, including the awarding of grades. These broad codes were used to identify sections of the journal that dealt with these topics, which were then manually colour coded. Next, these sections were compared to Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital in terms of embodied and institutionalised components. This process was one of mapping theoretical concepts onto the data. In this process of analysis, ways in which different forms of student cultural capital were valued (or not) by the college were derived. Hence the analytic strategy for the ethnographic data was to create typologies (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1996: 215-217) in identifying the ways in which cultural capital was valued by the college. In doing so, I returned to theoretical and policy literature as the ways in which cultural capital of white, working class students was valued by the college could not be explained without reference to historical and policy contexts. In particular, the way in which contemporary views on working class 'whiteness' were used to frame students' cultural capital was a powerful explanatory tool. This explanation served to illuminate several (seemingly) unrelated points of data simultaneously as I will show in Chapter 6.

### 3.4. CONCLUSION: A HYPHENATED STRATEGY

A 'hyphenated' research strategy – mixed-method and inter-disciplinary – is necessary to address the complex issue of why and how students progress from FE to HE. This approach is needed given the competing paradigms and research traditions in this field. However, as I have shown, this approach does not mean using different research methods to answer different research questions. Human capital theory, often tested through quantitative research, can also be investigated qualitatively in terms of both whether individuals are aware of the costs and benefits of HE and whether they attach importance to such factors. More ambitiously, an ethnography of human capital theory may be possible in establishing whether individuals are active, information seeking, agents. This is perhaps less true of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capitals, where quantitative analysis is less desirable, and interview and ethnography more so. Institutional approaches, often based at the level of individual case studies, also benefit from a mixture of descriptive statistical and quantitative techniques (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Ultimately, the mixed methods strategy that has been outlined has the potential to reveal the layered nature of student decision making. Individuals, their families, communities and the institutions in which they study are all potential micro and meso actors in the decision making process as I have shown in Chapter 2. This is not necessarily an argument for an eclectic theory of decision making, rather that evidence from various sources is needed in order to arrive at theoretical conceptualisation.

In the next three chapters I explain what the results of the three empirical investigations – survey and quantitative analysis, biographical interview and ethnography – have to say concerning the process by which these FE students might (or might not) progress to HE. Although each of the research methods is contained within its own chapter I have referred back and forth through the chapters as appropriate, both to build conceptual links and to triangulate the research findings. In the final chapter I determine what the evidence suggests concerning competing paradigms of HE progression and also comment on whether this research can be generalised to other students in the sector. I also consider whether ‘aspirations and attainment’ as a focus of current government policy on HE is either necessary or sufficient to widen participation.



## **CHAPTER 4: LESS THAN ZERO: LOGISTIC MODELS OF HUMAN CAPITAL AND OTHER FACTORS IN PROGRESSION FROM FE TO HE**

### **4.1. INTRODUCTION**

In Chapter 3, I discussed the reasons for a mixed methods strategy in researching progression to HE. One important element of this is quantitative modelling of the HE decisions that individuals make which should include their expected earnings following a degree. As shown in earlier studies (Williams and Gordon, 1981; Bosworth and Ford, 1985) individuals are willing and able to forecast expected earnings given different educational experiences. At the level of the individual there is also some evidence from studies outside of the UK that expected costs and benefits (the ex-ante rate of return) have a significant effect on the intention to enter HE (Menon, 1997 and Hung, Chung and Sui-Chu Ho, 2000) if not necessarily subsequent applications. Students may also be able to forecast debt (although constant shifts in government policy on issues of student finance between 1997 and 2003 might make such forecasts more difficult than forecasting the labour market consequences of a degree!). Even if these do not represent the whole stream of expected costs and benefits of education, human capital theory may be examined through the quantification of these factors. In terms of other factors, the quantification of class and ethnic classifications is crude, but some of the underlying features of these characteristics may be picked up in analysis. For example, although 'working class' carries a whole gamut of cultural possibilities the economic position of this class is

usually materially worse than those from ‘middle class’ occupations. Similarly, the economic position of those who express white racial background is usually better than those from other backgrounds, although participation in HE varies dramatically between different ethnic minorities (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997: 6).

In this chapter, I examine the relevance of educational costs and benefits in making various decisions connected with HE – a crucial question for the validity of human capital theory. I show that for many students, there are no expected overall economic benefits associated with HE after debt expectations are accounted for. Indeed, some individuals even consider that HE participation would be negative for their overall lifetime earnings. This applies to students of all social classes, indeed middle class students in the sample reported higher expected debt and lower expected earnings than working class students. In addition, I examine other influences on the HE decision. In particular, the influence of social class on this decision both in terms of primary influences (prior academic performance) and secondary influences (parental occupation). These characteristics (financial expectations, parental social class and prior academic achievement together with ethnicity) are the independent, or predictor variables in the subsequent statistical models. Such an analysis allows one to assess the effect of human capital considerations on HE decisions whilst controlling for other factors. To support this approach focusing on the demand for HE, I will also examine what might be called the supply side in terms of producer sovereignty in terms of the HE decision. This is evident in a (reasonably) transparent manner in terms of the entrance requirements for degrees set by HEIs. However, less evident

are the ways in which FE colleges ration access to qualifications which thereby determine access to HE. Descriptive quantitative analysis also allows me to question the nature of the institutional response of the three colleges to student demand for qualifications in FE. The extent to which we may express the decision to enter HE purely in terms of individual 'demand' for qualifications is therefore counter posed in terms of differences in curriculum offered by initial entry (GCSE) qualifications.

In examining individual demand for qualifications, the term 'aspirations' is frequently used in this thesis. Aspirations are used to refer to a wide variety of cognitions related to 'futuraity' – what individuals expect in the future. Firstly, *economic aspirations* are defined as subjective estimates of future costs and benefits of a decision path (as first described by Becker, 1964). In particular, the decision to enter HE or not may be examined in terms of estimated costs and benefits either as part of a survey (as discussed in this chapter) or more general economic assessments of the future (as discussed in the next). Secondly, *educational aspirations* are defined as subjective preferences for educational futures. Again, these might be in terms of quantified aspirations in terms of a questionnaire on HE intentions (as discussed in this chapter) or in terms of more subjective assessments of the future (as discussed in the next). With regard to HE, these can be in terms of a general desire to attend university or a specific desire to study at a particular institution (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001: 152-156).

Prior to discussing the statistical models, I outline the conduct of the survey in the field and the characteristics of the sample. This leads to a discussion concerning attrition: those students who completed the original survey but did not remain in the colleges. Next, I outline the results in terms of student expectations of earnings, forgone earnings and debt. The conclusion from this section is that, on average, students have a reasonably good knowledge of the costs and benefits associated with attending HE.

In the next section, statistical modelling is used to ascertain the degree to which the IRR (Internal Rate of Return) to HE and other factors influences the student's intention, application and attendance at HE. After some descriptive detail regarding the characteristics of students intending to apply to HE, actually applying to HE and attending HE, I apply the technique of logistic regression (Kleinbaum, 1994) as the dependent variable – the intention or application to go to HE (or not) – is dichotomous. This technique enables one to consider how far the independent variables influence the intention and application decisions. Three logistic regressions are conducted: one for the intention to attend HE, one for application to HE and one for actual attendance at HE. However, for this sample there was little discrepancy between attendance and application. In order to ascertain whether debt alone influences students' intentions and applications a subset of logistic regressions were conducted which are analysed in Appendix 2. Finally, I examine the extent to which the type of university, new or established, students intend to and actually apply to is influenced by the same independent variables.

In drawing conclusions from these statistical models I sometimes refer in this and other chapters to the influence of variables as ‘determining’ the outcome under discussion. This term is used reservedly as statistical models can not necessarily be said to establish substantive effects (although these claims are frequently made in statistical literature – Blaug, 1992). For example, the effects established through statistical models are only valid at a named level of significance. However, even given these reservations, the models in the thesis do provide some indication of causality as expected effect (e.g. application to HE) follows expected cause (e.g. expectations of the returns to HE). As previously discussed, this longitudinal design has greater explanatory power than cross-sectional designs (Menon, 1997; Hung, Chung and Sui-Chu Ho, 2000). In addition, the triangulation between the quantitative and qualitative data provides a deeper understanding of possible explanatory mechanisms. Even so, I use ‘determining’ in a loose sense as referring to a possible influence, rather than as an eternal, social scientific ‘law’.

In commenting on the results, I explain that the IRR appears to be a ‘sleeping’ variable in terms of its significance on the intention to apply to HE, but has no influence on the actual application decision. This puts into critical perspective ex-ante studies which claim that intention is a good indicator of attendance at university. However, given that an application to university is (partly) dependent on intention this means that there was some role for human capital considerations in the decisions of these students. In terms of other variables, social class is a significant predictor of intention

but not application, whereas ethnicity is a significant predictor of both. Critically, the importance of prior attainment at GCSE is relevant for progression to HE, although this may not necessarily reflect natural ability. As I will show in this and subsequent chapters, there are crucial differences in the ways in which students with different GCSE scores are treated by FE colleges. Finally, in an endpiece to this chapter I explain the ways in which the topic of social class has been dealt with in this chapter and in the rest of the thesis.

## **4.2. SURVEY DETAILS AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS**

### **4.2.1 Survey administration**

The survey was administered in September of 1998 when students had first started their courses. In order that the survey was triangulated with qualitative data, half of students in business departments in the three colleges were sampled. In practice, this meant that students in half of the business classes in each institution were sampled rather than half of students across all classes. I assumed that students were randomly allocated to groups by the colleges, although of course not to GNVQ and A level courses. In practice, a pseudo-random allocation of students to courses may have occurred as allocation to classes may have depended upon students' other choices of options and possibly the use of cultural and social capital in securing access to certain classes or teachers. However, it can be assumed that a reasonable representation of students attending the business faculties of the colleges was obtained. On the days in which the surveys were administered, some students were obviously absent from college. All students who were absent were asked to complete the survey on their

return, and this resulted in only two students in classes across the sample who did not complete the survey. Due to this small number, I assume that the results are not significantly biased by this omission.

Students were asked to complete the survey individually in the classroom and give honest answers, and generally complied with this request. However, as found in other studies (Williams and Gordon, 1981) some students (around one in ten) were confused when asked to arrive at an estimate of their expected earnings. Students who could not fill in the survey were encouraged to guess, although the degree to which these guesses are of the same quality as other estimates may be a matter for concern. It may indicate a degree of global uncertainty regarding earnings (having no idea) which is problematic for advocates of the human capital approach. Although the sample size was not adequate to enable me to test whether these 'no idea' students had significantly different expectations from others, this qualitative finding from the administration of the questionnaires should be borne in mind when interpreting the subsequent results. With the exception of the two students previously mentioned, there were no refusals in terms of completing the survey and no missing values. In total, 160 questionnaires were completed. Five students left in the first year of their courses which means that 155 questionnaires were used for analysis as there is no information available on whether these students subsequently applied for university or not. The characteristics of those students who did, and did not, complete the first year of their courses are discussed in the next section on sample characteristics.

#### **4.2.2 Sample characteristics**

Of the 155 students who did complete the questionnaire, item response was excellent with only the item on parental education receiving a response rate lower than 100%, as many students (24%) did not know the level of educational qualifications which their parents had achieved. Unfortunately, this meant that parental education was not used in the logistic model. One reason for this generally good item response rate was that as the sole researcher who administered the questionnaire I was able to explain the meaning of questions for students who asked for clarification. Additionally, as only five students left the sample during the survey this gave a very low rate of attrition (4%) well below the average non-completion rate of the colleges (approx. 15%). This was possibly due to the departmental policies in all three colleges which encouraged students to stay with their business courses. As attrition in the sample was so low, it seems somewhat arbitrary to compare the characteristics of those who left the sample with other students. However, for the record four of those were working class students on GNVQ courses, two each from West Essex and Thameside respectively. One student was an A level, middle class, student from Colne College. Given the level of attrition and its even distribution between colleges I did not consider that it would be a source of bias in the subsequent descriptive or statistical analysis.

In order to aid with the interpretation of student responses and to facilitate subsequent statistical modelling, coding of social class and ethnicity variables was undertaken prior to analysis. However, the original data was also kept in a disaggregated form to



aid with any subsequent analysis of sub-categories. In terms of social class, the occupations of both adults were coded into occupational categories and then into social class factions using the 'basic' method of social class coding as documented elsewhere (Rose and O'Reilly, 1997). Many of the students came from families where the mother was the principal earner and some came from single parent families. Therefore, the 'proxy' social class of the student was that of the highest social class parent rather than that of the father, as is commonly adopted. A simple dichotomy of class was adopted with students of managerial / professional parents (social classes 1 and 2 in the Registrar General's classification) described as 'middle class' and those of other social class grades described as 'working class'. Given the proliferation of low pay, poor condition, service jobs in the area and some subsequent data analysis, I decided not to classify those of social class status '3nm' (non-manual) as middle class. Although the dichotomising of class factions in the quantitative analysis described here is crude, particularly given the discussion in the previous chapter, it does give some idea of the particular benefits which high earning, high status groups might obtain in terms of educational progression. A more detailed rationalisation for this strategy is provided in an endpiece to this chapter (section 4.5.1).

A similar dichotomising was adopted with the ethnicity variable which was coded into 'white' and 'non-white' categories. As with class, this minimises the diversity within categories. 'Non-white', for example, could contain a number of categories with different rates of participation in HE. Moreover, the ethnic category 'white' also

could contain variation in terms of white-Irish, white-European or mixed race. As with all quantitative analysis, there are pragmatic reasons for such choices – they make statistical modelling of multiple categories possible – and subtleties both of ‘whiteness’ and ‘non-whiteness’ are addressed in Chapter 6.

Table 1 (below) shows the sample characteristics for three key variables: gender, ethnicity and social class for each of the three colleges surveyed. I have also included a column for the characteristics of the sample as a whole. In order to explore differences in the sample between colleges, the statistics were broken down by subject.

Considering the characteristics of the sample of business students as a whole, I show in Table 1 that the gender balance between courses is fairly even in A level, with 49% of respondents expressing their gender as male, although in GNVQ courses there are a greater proportion of men taking the courses (69%). Across all courses, 57% of the respondents were male. A higher proportion of GNVQ students were of ethnic minority origin (44% compared to 17% of A level students). Additionally, as expected, there are fewer GNVQ students from the managerial and professional classes (Registrar General’s social classes 1 and 2) in GNVQ courses (41%) compared to A level (69%). Perhaps reflecting social class differences, individuals on A level courses were more likely to come from families where at least one member of the household held a level 3 or level 4 qualification (67% as opposed to 51% for GNVQ students). GNVQ students also have a lower prior GCSE score (4.4

compared to 5.5 for A level students). These statistics are consistent with other statistical surveys on the social, ethnic and gender characteristics of GNVQ as opposed to A level students (Taylor Fitz-Gibbon, 1997: 36).

The characteristics of the sample are not necessarily consistent between colleges, although it must be remembered that the number of respondents in each college was small and therefore we must be cautious before drawing inferences from this information. However, there are three areas where the distribution of background characteristics within colleges deviates markedly from that found in the sample. Firstly, there were no GNVQ students of ethnic minority status sampled at Thameside College whereas 25% of the A level students sampled described themselves as non-white. Secondly, there is a marked difference in the number of male students studying for GNVQ at West Essex compared to those studying for A level (74% compared to 27%). Thirdly, there is little difference between the percentage of individuals from social classes 1 and 2 studying A levels when compared to GNVQ at the Colne College – in fact a higher percentage of GNVQ students sampled (82%) come from families of this status when compared with the A level students (78%). These reflect characteristics of the general student population, curriculum mix and prevailing assumptions concerning students at each college. At Colne, for example, GNVQ provision was small and marginalised within the college as a special provision, which meant that GNVQ students were selected more carefully by interview processes in the college. This may have led to a privileging of students from certain social classes, with other less articulate students having to take their

GNVQs at the local FE college or less prestigious sixth-form college. Certainly, students at West Essex and Thameside had much lower G scores than students at Colne.

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

College	Thameside		Colne		West Essex		Sample		
Course	A level	GNVQ	A level	GNVQ	A Level	GNVQ	A level	GNVQ	All
Male (%)	57	67	49	55	27	74	49	69	57
Ethnic minority (%)	25	0	4	18	64	66	17	44	28
Social classes 1 and 2 (%)	50	17	78	82	73	37	69	41	58
Member of family holds level 3 / 4 qual. (%)	73	56	46	50	88	50	67	51	62
G score (Mean, standard deviation in brackets)	5.1 (0.9)	4.5 (0.4)	5.6 (0.7)	5.1 (0.7)	5.4 (0.9)	4.2 (0.9)	5.5 (0.8)	4.4 (0.9)	5.1 (1.0)
N	28	11	55	12	11	38	94	61	155

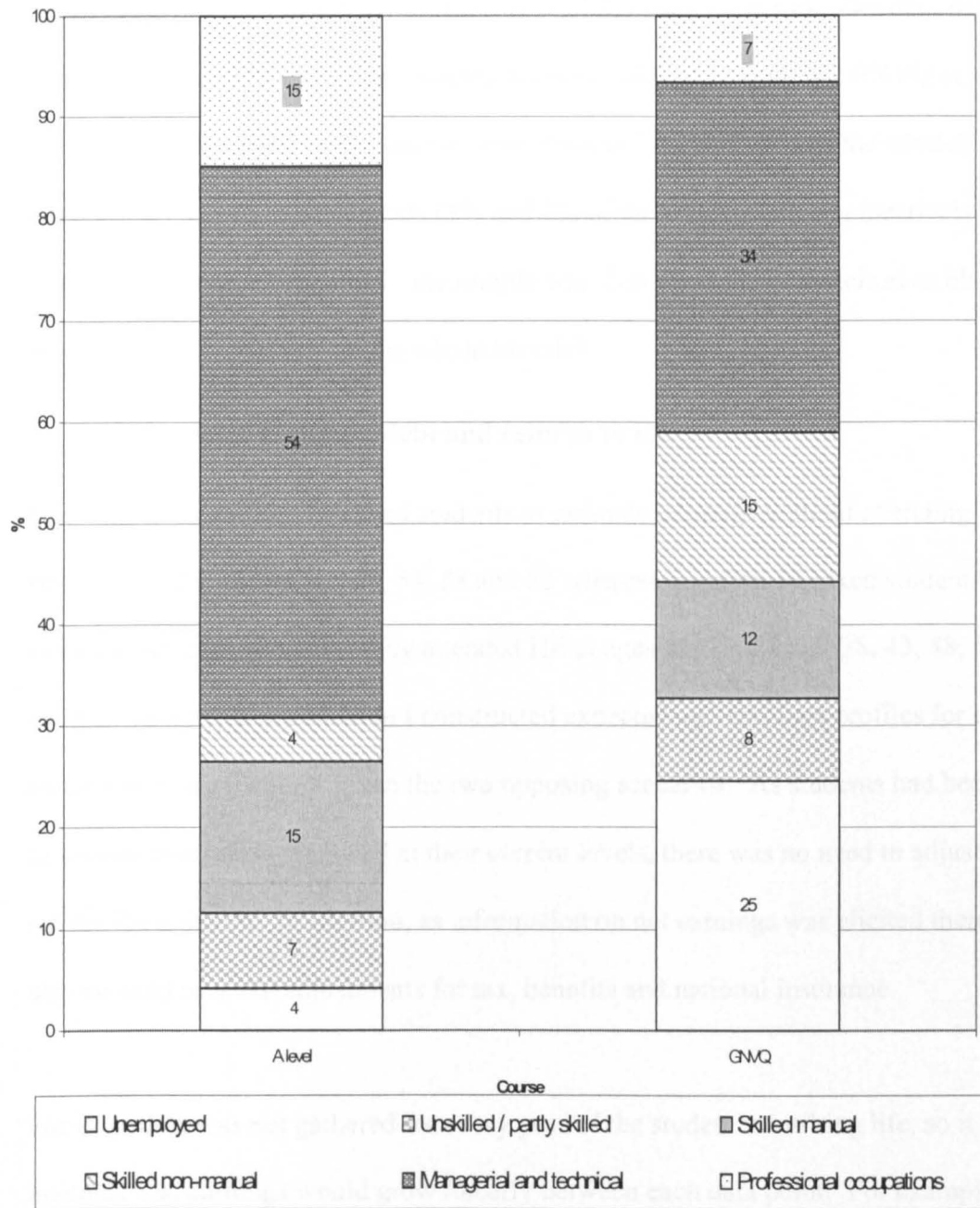
In Table 1 then, I have explored the broad characteristics of the sample. However, as characteristics such as ethnicity and social class are not necessarily dichotomous and in order to contextualise the characteristics of the sample further I examined the

breakdown of student characteristics by social class and ethnicity. This reveals subtle patterns within the data which are hidden by blanket categories of 'professionals' or 'non-white'.

Chart 1 (below) shows the distribution of students by familial social class within each course. A large proportion (69%) of students on the A level course were from families where the highest social class parent was in a professional (15%), managerial or technical occupation (54%). In comparison, only 41% of GNVQ students have families where the highest social class parent was of these classes. In terms of skilled and unskilled occupations there is less of a discrepancy. Interestingly, there were slightly more students from the families of skilled manual workers in the A level (15%) than the GNVQ sample (12%). In terms of skilled non-manual occupations, there were a greater proportion of GNVQ students from this social class (15% compared to 4%), this was possibly due to the number of students from these households where the mother, or female carer was the principal earner. For unskilled occupations the proportions were roughly the same (8% for GNVQ compared to 7% for A level). However, there were a large proportion of students studying for GNVQ business in the sample where no parent in the household was employed (25%) when compared to those studying for A level courses (4%). As this diagram shows, the class composition of A level and GNVQ courses in this sample is unquestionably skewed, although not necessarily in a straightforward fashion. Although the proportions of students from social classes 1 (Professional) and 2 (Managerial and Technical) is much higher in A level than GNVQ classes in the sample (69%

compared to 41%), and the proportion of students who are from non-working families is much higher in GNVQ than A level (25% compared to 4%), amongst other social classes the discrepancy is less marked (35% are of remaining social classes in GNVQ compared to 26% in A level). Therefore, although the composition of what might be called the skilled (manual and non-manual) and unskilled working classes was similar in each course, the A level classes also had a large proportion of students from families from social classes 1 and 2 whereas the GNVQ classes will have a relatively larger number of students from non-working families. However, one third of students in the GNVQ classes were also from social classes 1 and 2, which reflects the nature of FE in general, where a larger proportion of students from these social classes decide to continue with their education than in the population as a whole (McIntosh, 2001).

Chart 1: Course type and social class (N=155)





In terms of ethnicity and nationality, it was more difficult to make generalisations concerning the composition of students between courses, as a large number of students (72%) described their ethnicity as 'white'. Within ethnic minority students, the largest group described their origin as 'Indian' (16% of the whole sample). The majority of Indian students (72% of Indian students in the sample) were studying GNVQ courses. Other ethnic minorities in the sample were Pakistani students (4% of the whole), Bangladeshi and Chinese students (3% and 2% of the whole sample respectively). There was also one each of students in the sample who described their ethnicities as black other, mixed race and other (3% of the whole sample).

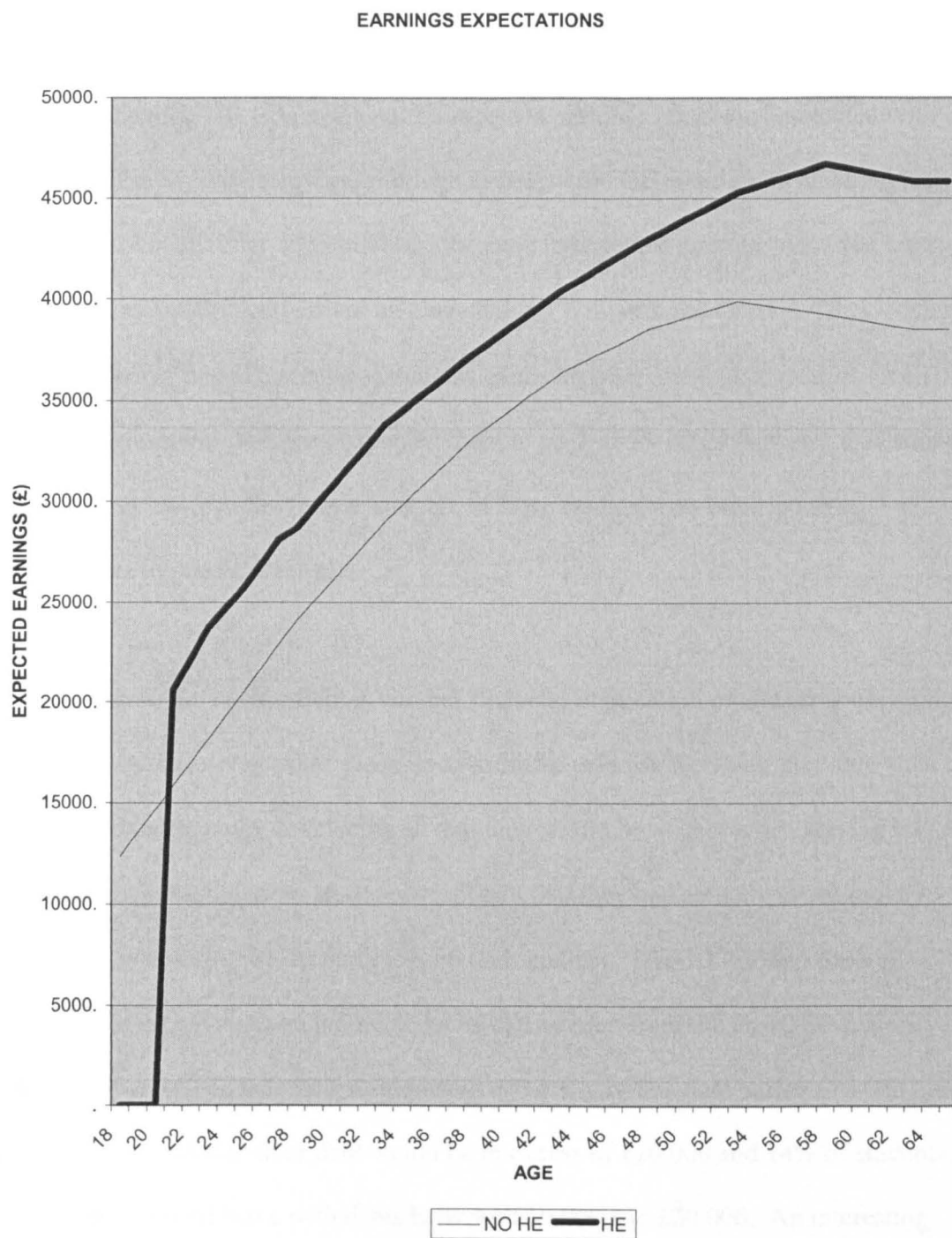
#### **4.2.3 Expected earnings, debt and returns to HE**

Question 11 on the survey asked students to estimate earnings without attending HE at ages 18, 23, 28, 33, 38, 43, 48, 53, 58 and 63 whereas question 14 asked students to estimate earnings given that they attended HE at ages 21, 23, 28, 33, 38, 43, 48, 53, 58 and 63. Given this information I constructed expected age-earnings profiles for each student showing earnings given the two opposing scenarios. As students had been asked to assume that prices remained at their current levels, there was no need to adjust the results for inflation. In addition, as information on net earnings was elicited there was also no need to make adjustments for tax, benefits and national insurance.

Earnings data was not gathered for every year of the student's working life, so it was assumed that earnings would grow linearly between each data point. For example if a student revealed that their expected earnings at 23 would be £10,000 and at 28 £15,000, I assumed that earnings would grow by £1,000 for each of the intervening years. That is,

at 24 they would be £11,000, at 25, £12,000 and so on. The exception to this rule was following age 63, when I assumed that earnings at ages 64 and 65 were expected to be the same as those at 63, following the general tendency for age-earnings profiles not to rise in later life (Cohn and Geske, 1990: 42). Although the method employed does not fully take into account the quadratic nature of the relationship between age and earnings, it provides a reasonable approximation of this relationship. Chart 2 (below) shows the mean age-earnings profiles for the sample under the two different scenarios:-

Chart 2: Expected earnings following higher education (N=155)

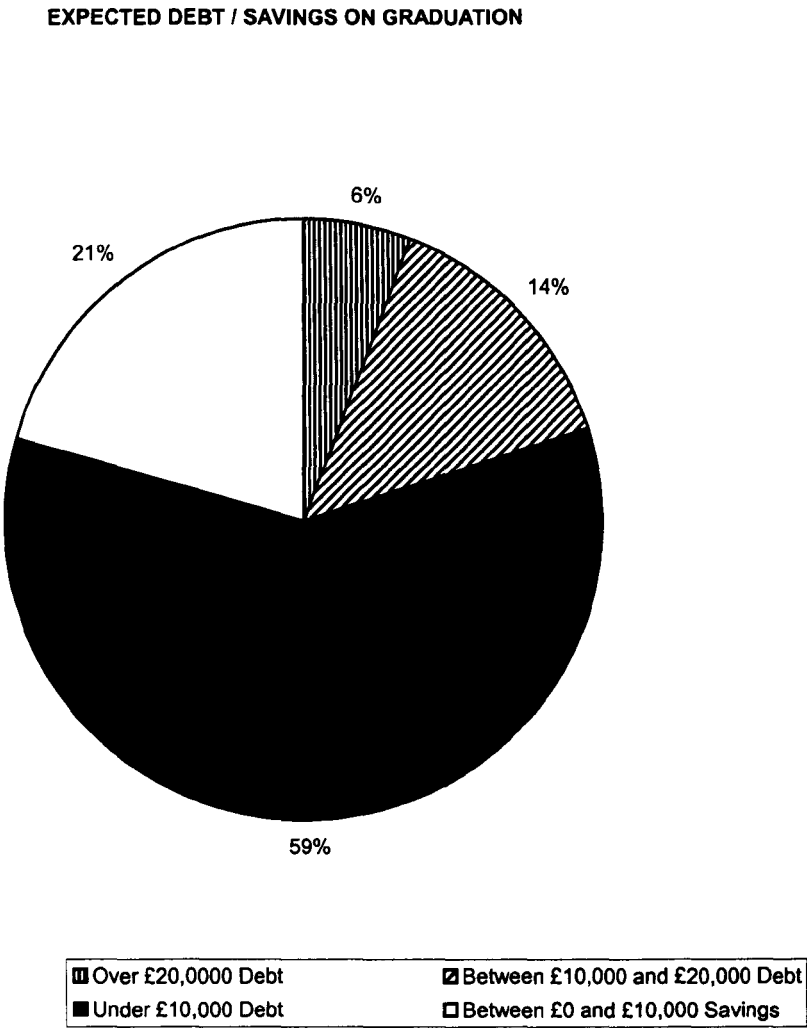


As can be seen in the chart, the mean earnings given that the individual attended (HE) or did not attend HE (No HE) follow the expected curvilinear age-earnings profiles expected by human capital theory. Moreover, there is a general tendency for expected earnings to be higher following HE. On average, the expected earnings premium associated with attending HE is £5,290 each year, although in later years the premium is much higher, rising to over £6,200 after 55. However, the peak in expected earnings occurred later than age 47, as anticipated in other ex-ante studies (Williams and Gordon, 1981; Menon, 1997). Under the non-HE scenario, students expected their earnings to peak at 53 on average, whereas with HE, they expected them to peak at 58. This indicates that asking about earnings at 46, rather than a later age in these studies, may have led to an underestimate of potential returns.

As well as earnings, student debt is another financial implication of attending university. Question 15 in the survey asked students to estimate debt for each year that they were at HE. Not all students may have believed that they would be in debt when leaving HE, and so an option was included for students to specify that they had actually saved money, perhaps due to working whilst studying, on their courses. Chart 3 (below) shows expected debt (or savings) on graduation. As can be seen from the chart, the majority of students (59%) believe that they would leave university with a debt below £10,000. A minority (6%) think that their debt would be in excess of £20,000 and 14% of students think that they would leave with debts between £10,000 and £20,000. An interesting result is that a sizeable proportion (21%) of students believe that they would leave university with no debt at all, and indicate that they would save money whilst in HE,

potentially through considering part-time or other employment, parental subsidy or financial support. The mean debt or saving expected by students, including those who believe they would save money whilst at university is -£5,187 which is higher than the estimated debt reported in other UK surveys. For example, Callender and Kemp (2000) report that students expect to leave university with debts of £3,463. This difference is even more marked if I exclude those who expect to save money in HE from the analysis, the average expected level of debt of the remaining 79% of students is -£8049 which is nearly double that reported by Callender and Kemp (2000).

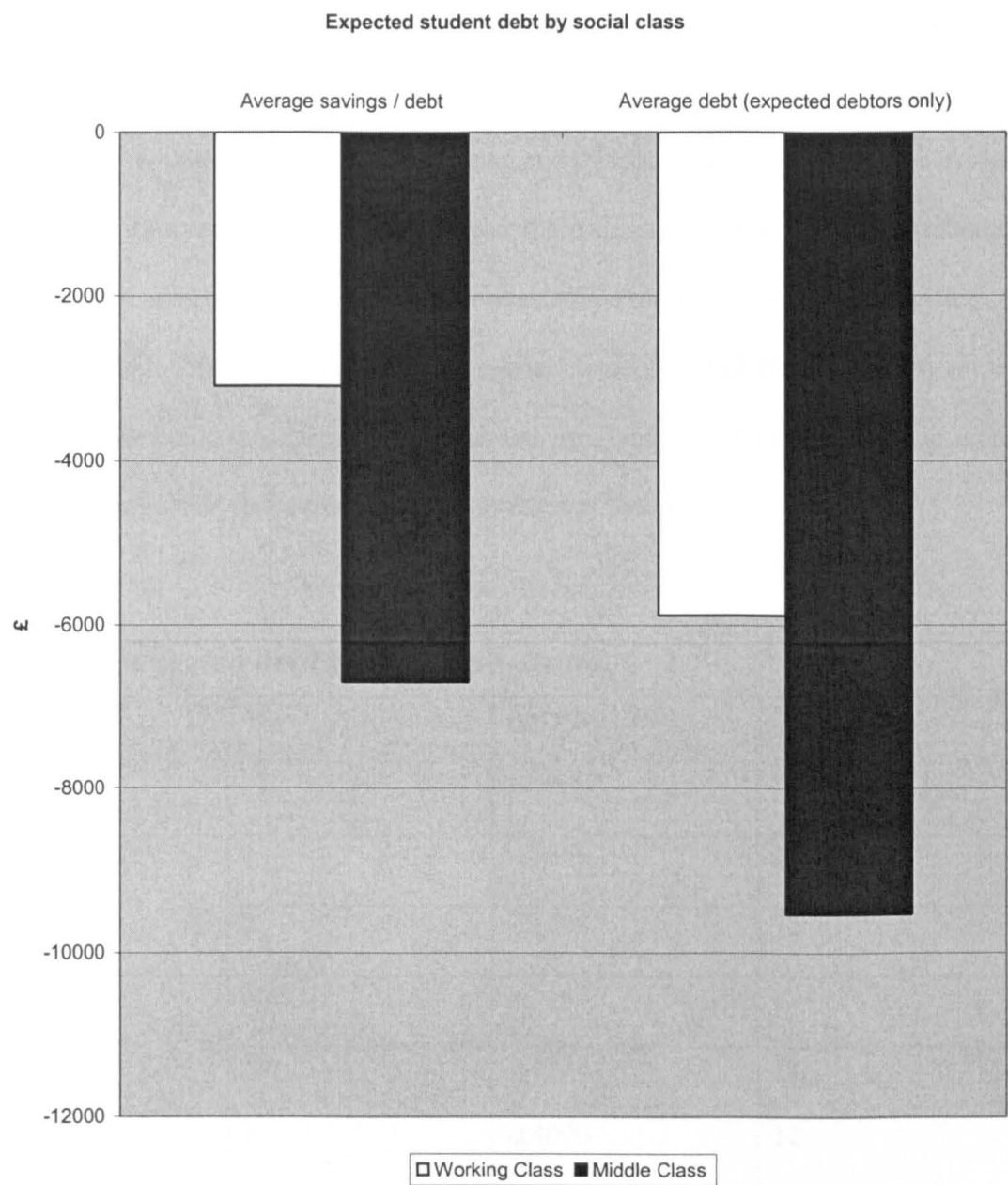
**Chart 3: Expected debt (N=155)**



One particular area of interest in this study is whether there are social class differences between expected earnings and debt. For example more recent research on student debt (Callender, 2003) indicates that ex-ante and ex-post debt differs according to socio-economic status with working class students experiencing higher levels of debt than middle class students.

When comparing levels of expected debt by social class for the sample of students chosen (Chart 4, below), the evidence suggests that there is no reason to suspect that middle class students in this sample (those from familial social classes 1 and 2) expect to incur lower debt levels than working class students (those from other social classes). In Chart 4, two indicators of expected debt are used. The first, 'average savings / debt' is the mean expected debt calculated to include the 21% of individuals in the sample who expect to save money at university. As can be seen in the diagram, the mean debt expected by working class students is lower than that of middle class students (-£3092 for working class students, N=65, -£6700 for middle class students, N=90). The second 'average debt, expected debtors only' is the mean level of debt when those who expected to save money at university were excluded from the analysis. Even when this measure of debt is taken into account, the pattern of results remain the same, with working class students expecting to be in less debt than middle class students (-£5880 for working class students, N=65, -£9534 for middle class students, N=90).

Chart 4: Expected student debt by social class (N=155)





This result contradicts previous evidence concerning expected and actual levels of debt for middle and working class students. Even given the low sample size, there is a marked difference between debt expectations. One possible explanation is that intra-class differentials are responsible for this result. That is, there are differences between debt expectations within sub-strata of the working and middle classes. However, the evidence for this in the survey was not strong. Indeed, there appears to be a negative correlation between debt and social class, even when we examine individual social classes. As shown by Table 2 (below), expected debt appears to decline with decreasing social class (the exception being those from skilled manual, 3m, families who expect to incur more debt on average than those from skilled non-manual, 3nm):-

**Table 2: Expected debt by class sub-strata**

Class	SEG	Expected debt / saving	N
MIDDLE CLASS	1	-£8666	18
	2	-£6208	72
WORKING CLASS	3nm	-£5142	13
	3m	-£5538	21
	4	-£4000	12
	5 and unemployed	£1421	19

Although the number of subjects (N) in each cell of Table 2 is small, there is a reasonably consistent relationship of declining expectations of debt as we move down the social class

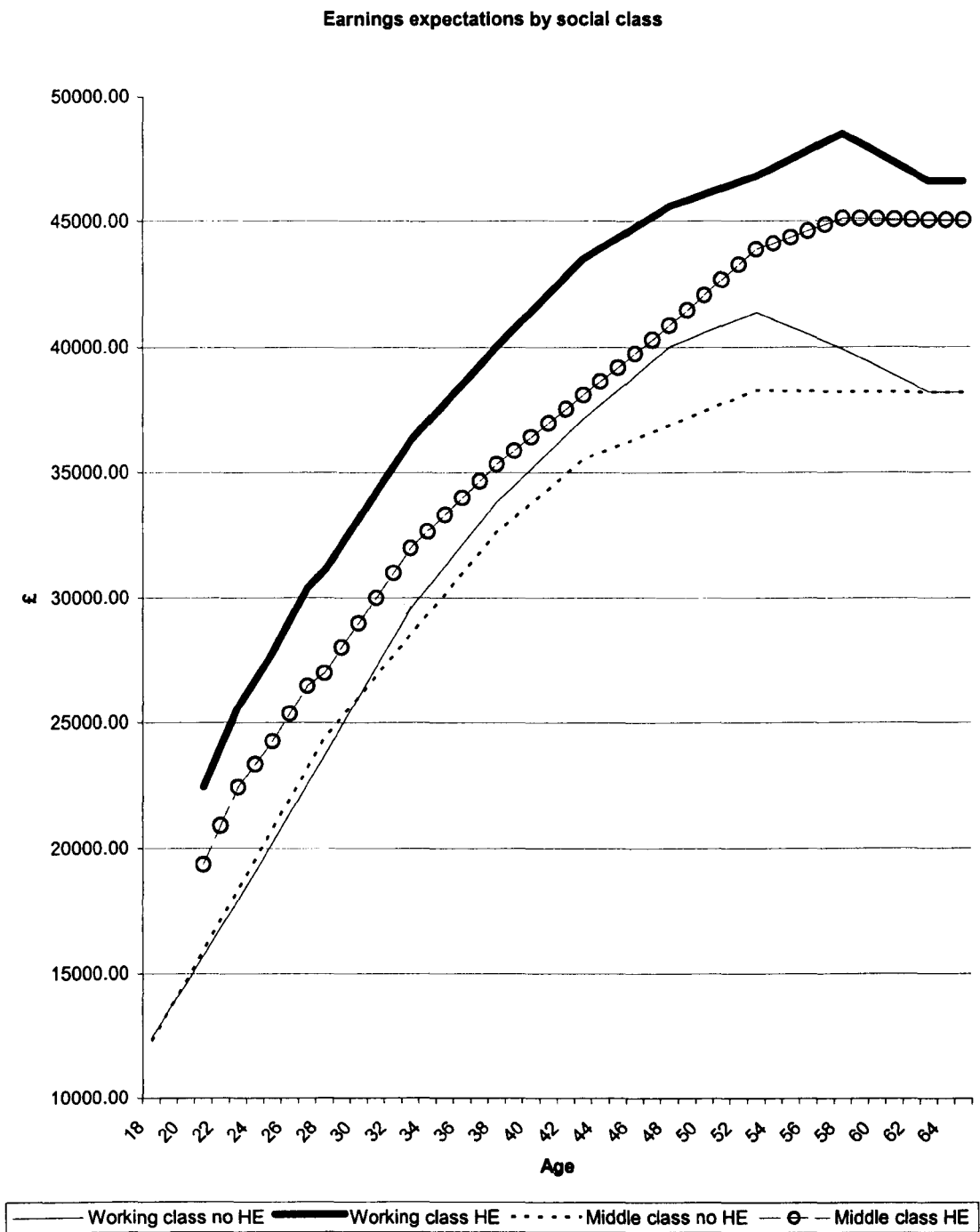
scale, with those in social class 1 expecting debts of -£8666 and those of social class 5 expecting to have saved money on leaving university. So there is little evidence that intra-class differences in expected debt are responsible for this result.

As I will show, qualitative data may point to an alternative explanation in terms of both differential access to information and debt-aversion by social class. Through interviews (Chapter 5), there is evidence that middle class students have superior access to familial and college information concerning HE opportunities. This may mean that they have a more accurate understanding of the debt implications of HE. This has been supported in surveys with larger samples (Callender, 2003; Callender and Kemp, 2000) and econometric studies (Ludwig, 1999). In addition, working class students, particularly of those from unemployed or unskilled households may not be willing to countenance the possibility of debt and assume that they would need to work through university to fund themselves. This is a realistic possibility given differential use of capital markets by socio-economic status. The particular characteristics of the sample chosen may be relevant here, as qualitative data seems to indicate that for the working class students, work was an important element in funding progression through post-compulsory education (see Chapters 5 and 6). An alternative possibility might be that these students have over-estimated the extent of financial support in HE.

A similarly paradoxical result is obtained when earnings expectations by social class are analysed. As can be seen in Chart 5 (below), although there is little discrepancy in earnings between expected earnings of middle and working class students under the non-

HE scenario before the age of 30, after that age, working class students actually expected to earn more than their middle class counterparts. The situation is even more marked when one considers expected earnings following HE, where working class students expect to earn more, on average, at every stage in the life cycle. This is possibly due to asymmetric information by social class (with middle class students possibly having more realistic expectations of their earnings). For example, if we take estimated earnings following HE at 21, there was a wider distribution of responses for working class students (standard deviation =11989) than for middle class students (standard deviation=6896).

**Chart 5: Earnings expectations by social class (Working class N=65; Middle class N=90)**



It seems then that although students on the whole have a reasonably good perception of the possible distribution of their future earnings, and of levels of expected debt, *generalisations* concerning the relationship between social class and these factors have not been shown to be as expected, at least for this sample. There is no generally low expectation of the economic benefits of HE for the working class students in this sample. At least economically, the working class students in this sample do not have 'low aspirations' (at least in terms of economic aspirations), rather their economic expectations are more diffuse than those of middle class students.

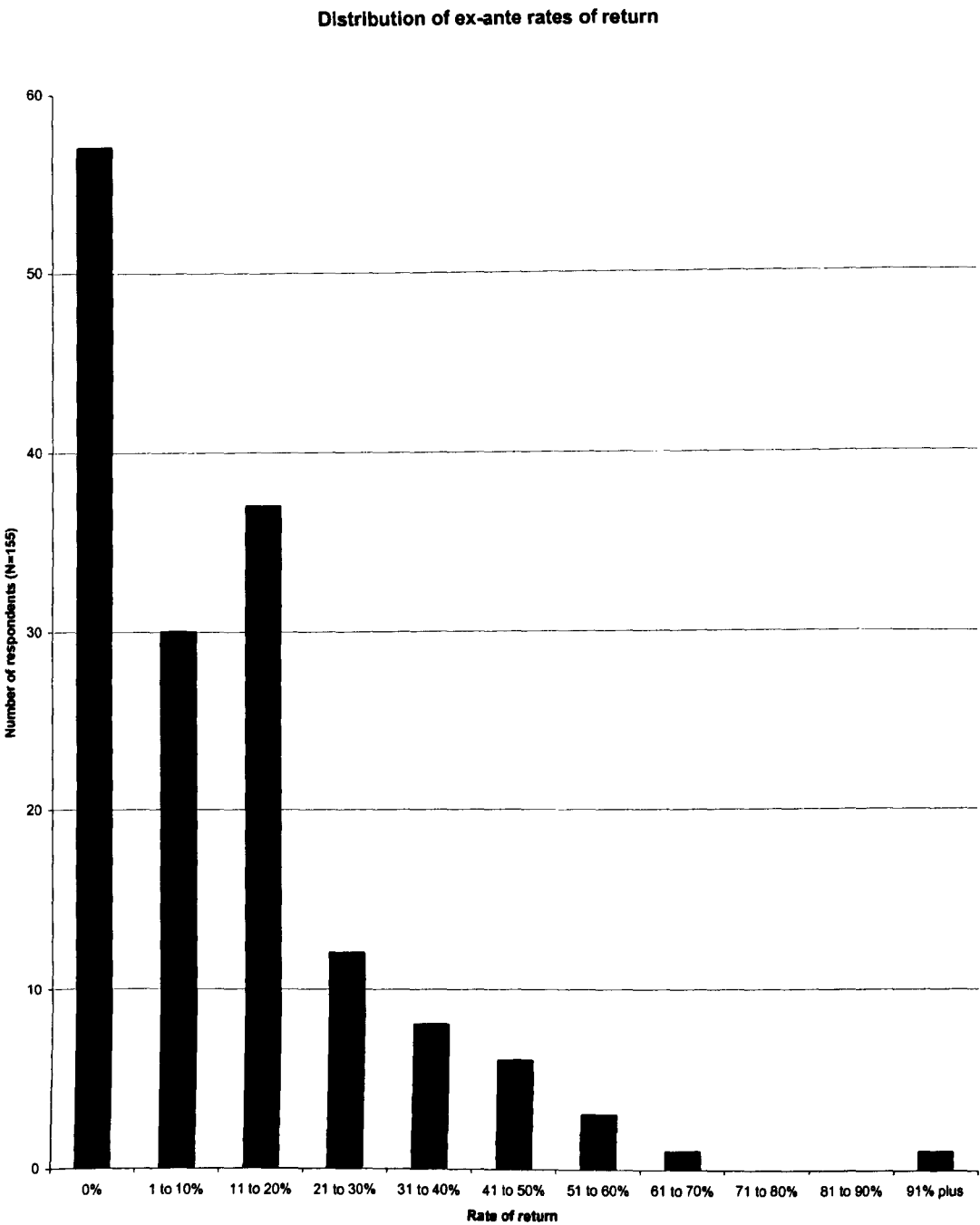
#### **4.2.4 Returns, (or no returns), to HE**

Given that information on expected earnings with and without HE and on expected debt given HE has been collected from students it was possible to calculate the ex-ante (expected) rate of return to HE. Assuming that students have full information, the ex-ante internal rate of return was calculated as the rate of discount which would equalise expected costs and benefits over the life cycle. Unusually for such an analysis, I have included expected student debt in the calculation of the ex-ante IRR. I have assumed that the current repayment terms for student debt will apply in the future as at the time when the students would have been expected to attend HE (2000), that is students will be taxed at 9% of their gross income above £10,000 until the debt is repaid and that the rate of interest on student debt is 0%. As net rather than gross income was elicited from students, I assume that given the 2000 system of British taxation, £10,000 of gross income is £8,500 net. Therefore, expected earnings (given HE) above £8,500 in the survey are taxed at 9% until the debt is repaid. In most cases (56%) the inclusion of student debt made less than 1% difference to the percentage rate of return expected by the

student, and in only two cases was the rate of return to HE depressed by more than 5%. In absolute terms then, the inclusion of student debt did not make a significant difference to the expected rate of return to HE, although inclusion of debt may mean that the rate of return calculated provides a more realistic assessment of the relative costs and benefits of attending university, given that after forgone earnings, student debt is for most the largest direct monetary cost of gaining a degree.

Calculation of the rate of return to HE produced a number of surprising results. The range of rates of return was very wide, ranging from 0% to 98% with fifty-seven individuals reporting no rate of return as their expected earnings following a degree were either identical or *never* greater than their expected earnings without one. The mean rate of return was 13% (12.6% to 1 decimal place) with a standard deviation of 15% – reflecting the dispersion of rates of return and the large number of individuals for whom a rate of return of 0% was calculated. Chart 6 (below) shows the distribution of rates of return:-

**Chart 6: Distribution of rates of return (N=155)**



As can be seen in Chart 6, the majority of individuals (80%) estimated that the return to a degree was between 0 and 20%, with very few individuals expecting that the rate of return would be any higher than 50% (3%). The 'outlying' individual that predicted a rate of return to education of 98% was not included in any further analysis. This rate of return appeared to be significantly different from that of the rest of the sample, and may have biased the results if included in a model of student behaviour. This hunch was confirmed by the use of a 'boxplot' which identified this observation as being an extreme case, with a value of more than three times that contained by the inter-quartile range of observations of the rate of return.

In terms of the validity of these results, the mean rate of return (13%) expected by students is below that obtained in other recent studies which estimate the ex-post private rate of return to a degree in the UK. Although close to the rate of return figures reported in the Dearing (1997) report with returns of between 11 and 14% for HE it is well below the figure of 28% for men and 25% for women reported in a recent study by the Centre for the Economics of Education (Dearden, McIntosh, Myck and Vignoles, 2000). However, it must be remembered that these figures were calculated on the basis of the average student, not the average FE student. In addition, the mean figure of 13% obscures the distribution of returns to HE and there were a number of students who predicted that there would be no rate of return to a degree at all. Indeed, the modal rate of return for the sample was 0%. This was surprising given both econometric evidence and government pronouncements on the economic value of HE. It should not be assumed that this discrepancy means that these students are irrational in assuming that attending HE is



of no additional economic value. In the calculation of the expected IRR in this study, expected debt was included which means that the rate of return was depressed. This would not have necessarily been a factor in ex-post studies in the UK where the IRR was calculated for cohorts before the imposition of student loans. However, as shown above the difference which this makes to the ex-ante rate of return is only of the magnitude of 1-2%. Therefore, most students in the sample are skeptical concerning the wage returns to HE. This result is not at all inconsistent with human capital theory – there is no reason why students should anticipate that the benefits of a degree would outweigh its costs. For example, these students may have inferred that over-supply of graduates following the expansion of HE may depress the rate of return so far as to make HE a poor investment.

One explanation for the discrepancy might be that students could expect that some types of HE might not be valuable although there was little difference between the mean expected rates of return between those intending to go to an established university (13%, 96 students) as compared to a new university (12%, 33 students) although the seven students intending to go to Oxford or Cambridge predicted a much higher rate of return (22%). The other eight remaining students (don't know, not answered or 'other HE') predicted a rate of return of 0%. Therefore, except at the margins, the expected returns to HE did not differ substantially by the type of university which individuals expected to attend – it was a general perception shared by students across social class groups. Indeed, the working class students (sixty four students) expected a rate of return of 15% compared to 10% for the ninety middle class students. Surprisingly, students following a GNVQ course (sixty one students) also believed that a higher rate of return would be

gained from following a degree (14%) than the ninety-three A level students (11%).

Therefore, a 'culture of low expectations', at least economically, is not necessarily true of working class students or those following vocational programmes. However, this is not to say that educational aspirations (in terms of an overall desire to attend HE, or to study at a particular institution) will not differ between classes. Even though students from a working class background may perceive high returns to attending HE, this may not in itself be sufficient to lead to application.

### **4.3. A LOGISTIC MODEL OF PROGRESSION TO HE**

#### **4.3.1 Modelling strategy and descriptive statistics**

Logistic regression provides a suitable framework for modelling dichotomous processes, such as the decision to apply or attend university, where the independent, or outcome, variable is either zero (not intending, applying or attending) or one (intending, applying or attending) (Kleinbaum, 1994; Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996: 575-634). Unlike linear regression, a non-linear (logit) function is fitted to the data in order to produce the odds of a unit change in the dependent or explanatory variable (such as social class) bringing about a change in the state of the independent variable. For example, if the log odds of a unit change in social class from working to middle class are 4 with respect to university attendance then it is four times more likely that a middle class person in the sample will attend university than a working class person. Although log odds are not easily translatable into probabilities, their ease of interpretability and calculation through various statistical packages makes them most appropriate for statistical analysis of this

type. The statistics package SPSS version 10 was used in the logistic regression analysis and in the computation of other statistics.

Examining the raw statistics for intention to apply to HE, application to HE and attendance of HE for the sample, reveals that the relationship between the three is not necessarily systematic: intention does not necessarily translate into application, and application does not translate into attendance. In particular, the relationship between intention to apply and subsequent action is not robust. It is possible to categorise the sample of 154 students into one of three event histories reflecting the possible combinations of intention, application and attendance (Table 3).

**Table 3: Event histories in descending order of frequency**

Event History	Intend	Apply	Attend	N
Coherent attendance	✓	✓	✓	76
Intention, no subsequent application	✓	✗	✗	35
Coherent non-attendance	✗	✗	✗	27
No intention, but applied and attended	✗	✓	✓	11
Intention, application but no attendance	✓	✓	✗	3
Attendance, intention, but no application	✓	✗	✓	1
Attendance, no intention or application	✗	✗	✓	1

As can be seen from the table, the most prevalent pattern of student behaviour was what I have called 'coherent attendance' (76 students) whereby the student intends to go on to HE, applies and attends. 'Coherent non-attendance' is less common, whereby the student neither intends to apply to HE, does not actually apply and does not attend HE (27 students). There are also two fairly common mixed event histories. The first is where students in the sample intend to go on to HE, but take no further action towards this aim, at least in terms of applying or filling in an application form (35 students). Less common are those where the student applied and attended HE with no previous intention (11 students). There are also three uncommon event histories – in only three cases did students intend to go to HE, applied but did not attend and two cases where attendance was not preceded by an application.

As can be seen by these histories, there is not always correspondence in the sample between initial intention to attend HE and attending a HE institution. This highlights both the dynamics of transitions through education (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001) and the danger of assuming that the intention to enter HE is evidence of future progression. In total, 38 students who intended to go to university did not end up attending HE, at least initially. Indeed, the correlation (Kendall's tau) between intention and attendance is fairly low at +.319 (although significant at the 5% level). However, there is a closer relationship between application and attendance. Only 3 students who applied to HE ended up not attending, although two students also attended without making an initial application. The (Kendall's tau) correlation between application and attendance is therefore almost 1 (.933, also significant at the 5% level). Given these event histories, it

seems that intention and application are the two key processes to model – attendance at HE largely follows the pattern of applications. However, I will model HE attendance to signal the importance of subsequent exam performance in attendance at HE.

Following Menon (1997) a logistic regression model was employed with intention as dependent variable and ROR (the rate of return to HE, also known as the internal rate of return or IRR), CLASS (professional or managerial social class / other social class), ETHNIC (non-white ethnicity / white ethnicity) and G\_SCORE (average GCSE score prior to A level) as independent variables. Due to the sample chosen, there is a limit to the number of co-variates which can be used in this analysis. Other co-variates such as parental education were unfortunately not included due to the large proportion of missing data (37 cases, or nearly a quarter of the data). Gender was also not included as, from descriptive statistics, there appeared to be no particular relationship between gender and the outcomes concerned. Unlike Menon (1997) the decision process is continued beyond intentions to applications and attendance at HE. As shown by the (above) correlations, there is some relationship between intention and application and particularly application and attendance at HE. Rather than use intentions in the model of applications and applications in the model of attendance each part of the decision was modelled separately using the characteristics described above. This aids interpretation as each previous stage of the model is already influenced by what happened in the previous stage. For example, as attendance at HE is highly correlated with application, there is little to be gained from modelling attendance with applications and other dependent variables as the influence of these variables will be masked by the inclusion of application (which is already

influenced by factors such as social class). Indeed, there is an argument for not modelling application and attendance as separate processes given their close correlation. This was rejected, as attendance at HE requires a certain level of performance in final examinations (UCASPTS ) that will be included in this final regression. Descriptive statistics are given in Table 4 (below):-

**Table 4: Definitions and descriptive statistics for dependent variables (N=154)**

Variable	Definition	Mean (S.D.)
Ethnicity (ETHNIC)	1= Self described non-white ethnicity / 0= Self described white ethnicity (Comparison category)	.27 (.45)
Parental occupation (CLASS)	1 = Professional or managerial (SEG 1 and 2)/ 0=Non-professional or managerial (Comparison category)	.58 (.49)
G-Score (G_SCORE)	Average of GCSE scores at age 16.	5.1 (.98)
Rate of Return to HE (ROR)	Expected rate of return to HE.	12.1 (14.5)
Performance in final examinations (UCASPTS)	Total points amassed for entry to university (At A level, A=10, B=8...E=2, N/U=0; at GNVQ, Distinction=20, Merit=12, Pass=4).	11.8 (8.8)

#### 4.3.2 Intentions

The first model is of initial intention to go to HE which were observed at the same time as when students completed the survey (Table 5, below):-

**Table 5: Logistic regression for intention with standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics and odds ratios**

Pseudo  $R^2$  (Cox and Snell): 0.178

-2 Log Likelihood: 144.093

Percentage intentions predicted: 74.7%

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds ratio
ROR	.061	.022	7.729**	1.063
CLASS	.908	.446	4.141*	2.480
ETHNIC	2.608	.787	10.978***	13.568
G_SCORE	-.015	.221	.004	.985
CONSTANT	-.386	1.180	.107	.680

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

As a whole, the explanatory power of the model is good compared to other economic models of similar decisions (Menon, 1997), with a Pseudo  $R^2$  of 0.178 and the classification table of the model showed that 74.7% of intentions could have been predicted from the information contained in the model.

As can be seen in the table, the expected rate of return to HE is a significant factor ( $p < 0.01$ ) in the intention to proceed to HE with a unit increase in the expected rate of return increasing the natural log odds of applying to HE by 1.063. Social class, as



represented by occupational status of highest social class parent, is also significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level of significance. Those with a parent from social classes 1 and 2 are over twice as likely to intend to apply for HE than those of other social classes. Non-white ethnicity is also a significant factor ( $p < 0.001$ ) with those of non-white ethnicity being over ten times more likely to intend to apply for HE than those of white ethnicity. Prior academic qualifications, though, as measured by the G-score are not a significant factor for those intending to apply to university.

This model, then, supports the central contention of human capital theory in that expected costs and benefits are influential in the intention to enter HE. It also supports the contention that parental social class, is an important factor in influencing intentions. Hence a primary mechanism for progression to HE is in operation – familial social class appears to have an influence on intention. Although not an explicit test of Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital this does indicate the importance of social position in the intention to enter HE. Interestingly, non-white ethnicity is a significant and influential factor for these students in influencing the intention to enter HE. At this stage in the decision process, though, the prior attainment of students, as measured by their G-score is not a significant predictor of the intention to progress to HE. There was a dramatic reversal of these determinants when the model was re-run for applications to HE.

### 4.3.3 Applications

When the model was re-run using actual applications to HE, rather than the intention to apply to HE, there was a significant change in the relative importance of the explanatory variables (Table 6).

**Table 6: Logistic regression for application with standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics, and odds ratios**

Pseudo  $R^2$  (Cox and Snell): 0.109

-2 Log Likelihood: 191.259

Percentage applications predicted: 63.6%

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds ratio
ROR	.020	.013	2.562	1.020
CLASS	-.201	.379	.282	.818
ETHNIC	1.136	.440	6.671*	3.115
G_SCORE	.720	.218	10.896**	2.055
CONSTANT	-3.743	1.154	10.520**	.024

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

As can be seen from the above table, the explanatory power of the model of applications is not as great as that for intentions with a Pseudo  $R^2$  of only .109 with 63.6% of intentions predicted. However, the explanatory power of the dependent variables in the model of applications is different from that for intentions. In particular, student G score is a significant predictor of applications ( $p < 0.01$ ) with a unit rise in G score increasing the natural log of odds in applying for HE by 2.055. Parental social class and the rate of return to HE are not significant predictors of the decision to apply to HE, at least at the

5% level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ). Non-white ethnicity remains a significant predictor of applications ( $p < 0.05$ ), as well as intentions, with those of non-white ethnicity being over three times more likely to apply to HE as those of white ethnicity.

The above models show that, for this sample of students, the perception of the rate of return to HE is a significant factor in the intention to apply to HE, but not in the actual application to HE. In order to ascertain whether other economic factors, aside from the rate of return, were influenced in the application decision, the intention and application models were re-run with total expected debt as a covariate. These logistic regression models are shown in Appendix 2. As can be seen in these models, total expected student debt is not a significant factor in predicting either intentions or applications to HE. The conclusion is that, at least for these students, a weak form of human capital theory is supported in that intentions, but not applications, to HE are influenced by the expected rate of return. There are two caveats to this conclusion. It must be accepted that there is a reasonable correlation between the intention to apply to HE and the application to HE. Therefore, expectations of the rate of return may have a sleeper effect in that they influence applications to HE indirectly through their influence on intentions. The other possibility is that the rate of return to HE has been re-estimated by individuals and that the expected rate of return at application differs from the expected rate of return at intention. A follow-up survey on expectation change, given time and resources, would have been useful here. However, qualitatively there was little evidence that students were altering their expectations of HE in any systematic fashion (see Chapter 5). Interestingly, non-white ethnicity is the only positive and significant factor in both intention and

applications. This is supported by evidence regarding applications to HE, where certain ethnic minorities are more likely to apply to HE than white students. The ethnic minorities in this sample of students, being drawn mainly from an Asian rather than African-Caribbean background are particularly those who are more likely to apply to HE (Coffield and Vignoles, 1997: 6).

Social class, at least as expressed in terms of occupation of the highest social class parent had a significant effect on intention, but not on application. Again, social class may have had an influence on applications as a sleeper effect. There is an additional possibility that the gradation of social class into two categories was too simplistic in the analysis, and that finer gradations of social class may have revealed differences in applications.

Unfortunately, finer gradations were not possible given the constraints of sample size.

Part of the influence of social class in application may have been masked by the influence of G-Score on application as the two variables are highly correlated (Kendall's tau coefficient of .284, significant at the 1% level), although this relation is still not necessarily sufficient as to cause issues of collineality in the logistic regression model (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996: 84). That is, these variables are not sufficiently correlated so as to bias the regression results.

The strong and significant influence of G-score on application raises a number of issues concerning the meaning of this finding. One perspective is to see G-score as a measure of intrinsic ability or motivation and its influence on application rather than intention as being part of a discovery process. Students learn that they do not have the ability for HE

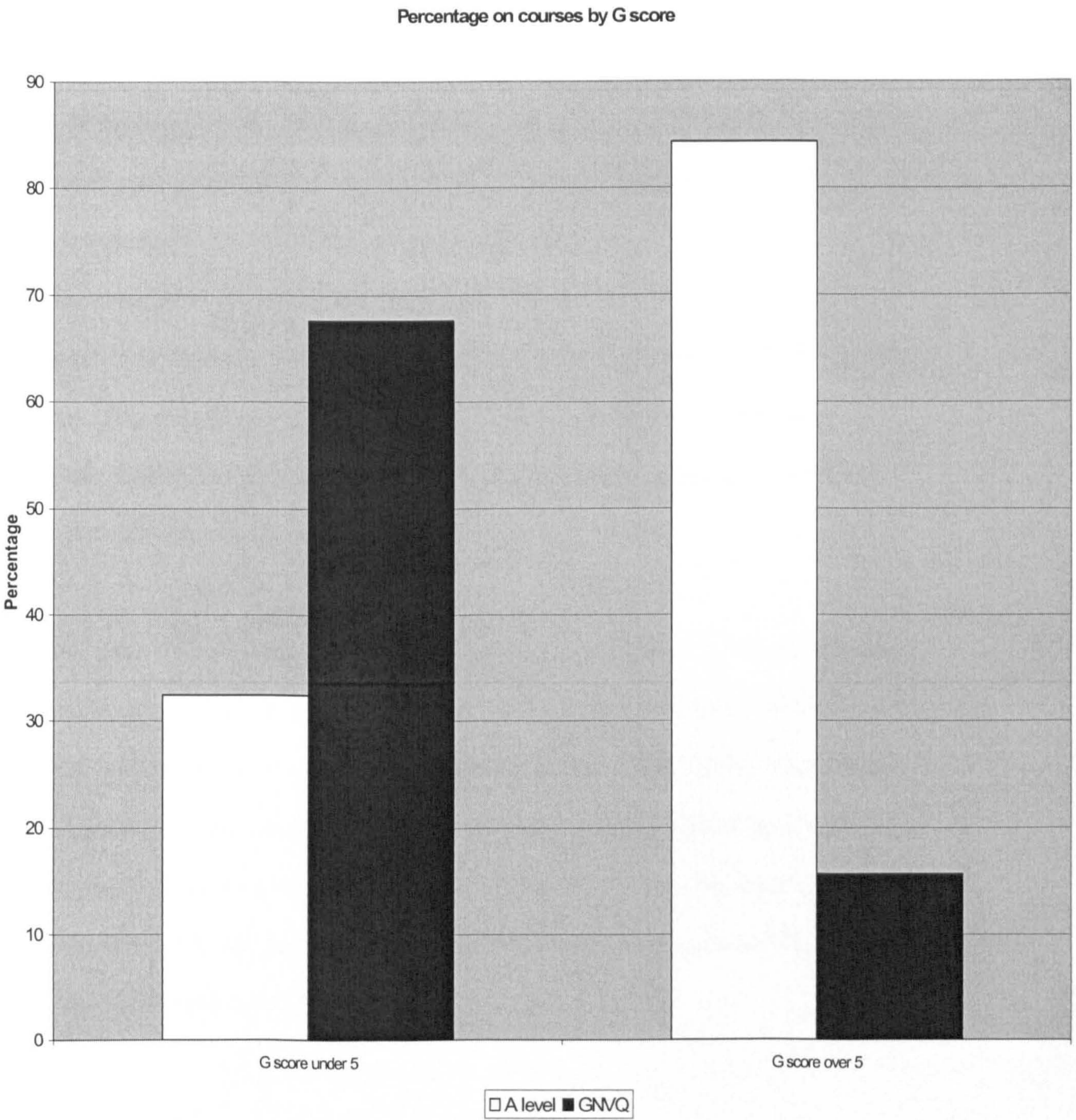
and therefore decide that application is not a favourable option. They are therefore matching their ability with their potential to enter HE. An alternative perspective is that G-score arises through earlier inequalities, especially social class but also ethnicity, rather than being indicative of ability. The importance of G-score in application arises due to the positioning of students in their FE colleges, perhaps through placing on vocational and academic routes, and the constraints which are thereon placed on future HE positions. Of course, both positions are possible, but it is difficult to apportion significance without longitudinal evidence regarding factors such as earlier ability or the setting of students in schooling. Alternatively, we may draw on qualitative evidence, and the next chapters show that on the basis of ethnographic and interview data, there is material to support the rationing position rather than the information seeking view of social behaviour. However, even within the quantitative data there is some evidence that some 'rationing' of courses and therefore opportunity to attend HE was occurring, as I will explain in the next section.

#### **4.3.4 Rationing Higher Education?**

What did emerge from examining descriptive statistics and a further logistic regression was the relationship between a 'threshold' G score of 5, course allocation and subsequent application to HE. As we shall see in Chapter 5, a G score of 5 or above was used by the colleges as an entry criteria for A level courses, with other students being persuaded, cajoled or offered no other alternative (other than going to another provider) than to pursue the vocational GNVQ route even though over 89% of the sample originally applied for A level courses. Chart 7 (below) shows the percentages of students on A level and GNVQ courses by G score. As can be seen in the diagram, 68% of students

with a G-score of below 5 ended up taking GNVQ courses, as opposed to only 16% of those with a G-score of 5 or above. Similarly, only 32% of students with a G-score of below 5 ended up on an A level course, as opposed to 84% of those students with a G-score of above 5. In short, students with a G-score of above 5 were over five times more likely to be taking an A level, rather than a GNVQ course whereas those with a G score of below 5 were over twice as likely to be studying for A levels, rather than GNVQ.

Chart 7: Course and G-score (N=155)



There were also differences between the combinations of subjects which individuals were taking with their Business GNVQ or A level depending upon whether their G-score was greater than or less than 5. In terms of students on a purely A level course, 26% of students with a G-score of 5 or less were initially studying for only 2 A levels, compared to 3% of students with a G-score of greater than 5. Similarly, 39% of the students with a G-score of greater than 5 who were studying for GNVQ were taking an additional A level, compared to 17% of students with a G-score of less than 5. More subtle differences occurred in terms of A level subjects studied where English Literature, Geography and Sociology were the most commonly combined subjects with business for students in the sample with a G-score of greater than 5, and Physical Education, Computer Studies and Mathematics being the most commonly combined subjects for those students with a G-score below 5.

Whether these tendencies are a result of self-selection or rationing, it seems that there are differences between the FE educational experiences of those with G-scores of above or below 5. Therefore, to examine whether a G-score of greater than 5, rather than simply an increase in G-score, was a predictor of the decision to apply to university, I reran the second logistic regression model for the decision to apply to university again with G-score above 5 (GOVER5) as a covariate, rather than G-score. The results of this logistic regression are provided in Table 7.



**Table 7: Logistic regression for application with standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics, and odds ratios (Gover5 as a covariate)**

Pseudo  $R^2$  (Cox and Snell): 0.103

-2 Log Likelihood: 192.278

Percentage applications predicted: 64.3%

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds ratio
ROR	.022	.013	3.024	1.022
CLASS	-.107	.373	.083	.898
ETHNIC	1.057	.431	6.015*	2.877
GOVER5	1.275	.385	10.943***	3.577
CONSTANT	-.815	.415	3.852*	.443

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

As can be seen in Table 7 (Above), GOVER5 is a strongly significant predictor of the decision to apply to university ( $p < 0.001$ ). This is perhaps unsurprising given that the previous logistic regression shows that an increasing G-score is associated with an increase in the odds of attending university. However, it does show a strongly significant effect for those applying to university with a G-score of above 5 when compared to those with a G-score of below 5 whatever the actual level of their GCSEs within these categories. This test is not ideal, and with a larger sample size it would be possible to test whether this threshold effect was systematic by testing whether there were differences in applications between students with G scores of 4.5-5.5, compared to 3.5-4.5 or 5.5-6.5, for example. However, as an exploratory result, it is indicative of a threshold effect

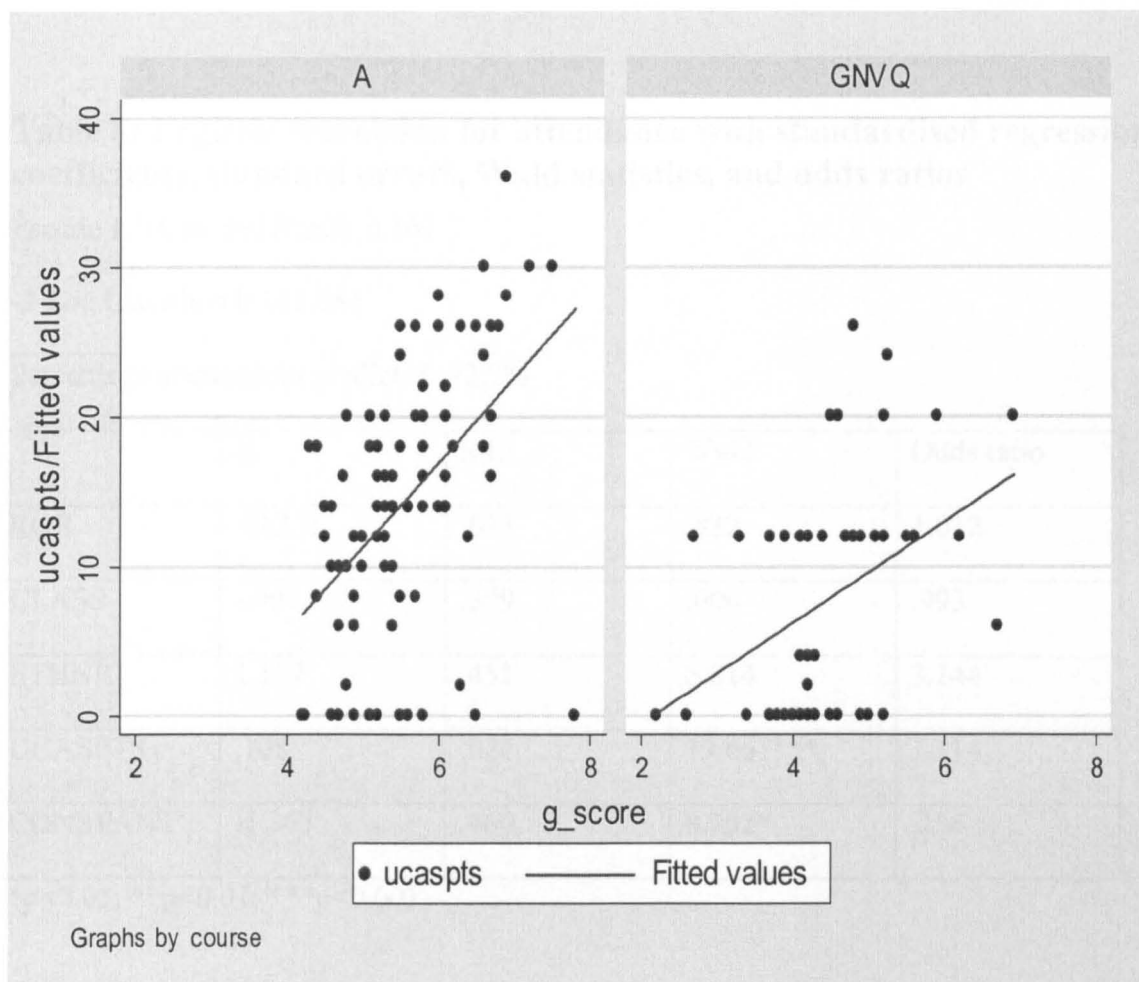
which may be due to the different FE experiences of those individuals with differing GCSE scores.

#### **4.3.5 Attendance at HE**

There is little difference between the event histories of those who applied to HE and those who attended HE (Table 3). That is, only two students attended HE without formally making an application the year before and only three students did not decide to enter HE after making an application. However, the factors which encourage attendance at HE may be different to those which are central in making an application. In particular, attendance at HE depends upon the student gaining sufficient grades in order to attend. Although most HEIs specified particular grades required for attendance in 1999, a certain number of UCAS points were also demanded. UCAS points were calculated as being tradable for A levels (A: 10, B: 8, C:6, D:4, E: 2) and GNVQs (Distinction: 20, Merit: 12, Pass: 4). As has been identified in studies of examination performance there is a close correlation between performance at GCSE and UCAS points (Taylor Fitz-Gibbon, 1997). In this study, the Pearson correlation was .562 ( $p < 0.01$ ). However, there was not necessarily a *linear* relationship between G-score and UCAS points. At least descriptively there was a difference in the relationship between G-score and UCAS points between those on a mainly GNVQ or A level course (see Chart 8, below). As can be seen in Chart 8, the relationship between G-score and UCAS points for those on mainly GNVQ courses is not as favourable as for those on A level courses. This is even for those individuals who are taking an A level with their GNVQ, who are also included in the sample. The chances of gaining a UCAS point score of 20, for example, are very slim for those on a GNVQ course with similar G-scores to those on an A level course. As

shown in Chapter 6, this could be because the quality of programme provided for students on a GNVQ course was not as good as that on an A level course. A more straightforward explanation could be due to a 'ceiling' effect of the GNVQ in that there is little possibility of increasing one's grade beyond a merit (12 UCAS points) or distinction (20 UCAS points) whereas it is technically possible to achieve a points score of 20 UCAS points with just 2 A levels (2 grade 'A's).

**Chart 8: GCSE score and UCAS points by course type (N=155)**



The importance of UCAS points in securing access to HE are shown in Table 8 which provides a logistic regression for attendance at HE, with other controls:-

**Table 8: Logistic regression for attendance with standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics, and odds ratios**

Pseudo  $R^2$  (Cox and Snell): 0.167

-2 Log Likelihood: 181.681

Percentage attendances predicted: 72.7%

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds ratio
ROR	.012	.013	.832	1.012
CLASS	-.007	.379	.000	.993
ETHNIC	1.177	.451	6.814	3.244
UCASPTS	.108	.024	19.661***	1.114
CONSTANT	-1.363	.460	8.792*	.256

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

As can be seen in Table 8, UCAS points are of fundamental importance in attending HE, more so than any other direct influence including estimated rate of return, social class and ethnicity. It must be remembered, though, that these variables will have an earlier effect through UCAS points. For example, it is reasonable to assume social class influences G-score which will then influence UCAS points gained. Clearly, for this group of students there are different influences at different stages of the process of attending HE.

#### **4.3.6 Intention, application and attendance as process**

In terms of intention, application and attendance at HE, I have shown that these are driven by different social processes for this sample of students. In terms of the intention to apply for HE, there is evidence to support human capital theory – the rate of return is a significant predictor ( $p < 0.01$ ) of the intention to apply to HE. There is also evidence to support primary socialisation, in that parental SEG predicts the decision with families with at least one professional or managerial parent (SEG 1 or 2) being more likely to intend to apply to HE. As intention is correlated with application, these variables can be considered to be ‘sleepers’ variables, in terms of having a later, indirect impact on applications even though they are found not to be individually significant in predicting applications directly. I also found that non-white ethnicity was a predictor of both intention and application to university with non-white students being ten times more likely to intend and three times more likely to apply to university than those with white ethnicity.

In terms of application to university, though, GCSE performance enters as a significant predictor. GCSE performance, as a secondary socialisation device, could be considered a proxy for earlier social disadvantage, although note that parental social class did not determine the application decision (although I refer the reader back to the subsequent discussion of the adequacy of statistical models in identifying ‘determining effects’, there is little evidence that parental social class is an influence in this model). The influence of G score could be due to student self-selection with students reflecting upon their ability or motivation (of which GCSEs could be considered a proxy). However, there are

marked differences in the educational experiences within FE between those with a G-score of above and below 5. This is not necessarily due to self-selection. The vast majority of students (89%) applied for A level, rather than GNVQ courses at college whereas only 60% of students ended up on A level courses. Descriptive statistics also indicate more subtle differences between the courses taken by those with G-scores of above and below 5, both in terms of subject mix and number of additional subjects studied. Again, this could be due to self-selection and/or rationing of subjects and additional subjects by colleges which will be explored in the next chapter. What I have shown is that a G-score of above 5, as well as level of G-score, is a strongly significant predictor of university application. Thus secondary socialisation is shown to be a stronger predictor of application than either primary socialisation (parental social class) or economic expectations.

At the stage of attendance, the ability of students to convert this G-score into subsequent A level performance is clearly important as UCAS points are the prime determinant of attendance at HE. However, as has been shown the ability of students to achieve this conversion depends upon the type of course which students are on – the ‘rate of exchange’ of GCSE points for UCAS points differs according to whether students are on an A level or a GNVQ course. Through the quantitative data it is not clear whether this process is one of self-selection (choice) or producer sovereignty (rationing) although this issue is discussed in later chapters (5 and 6).

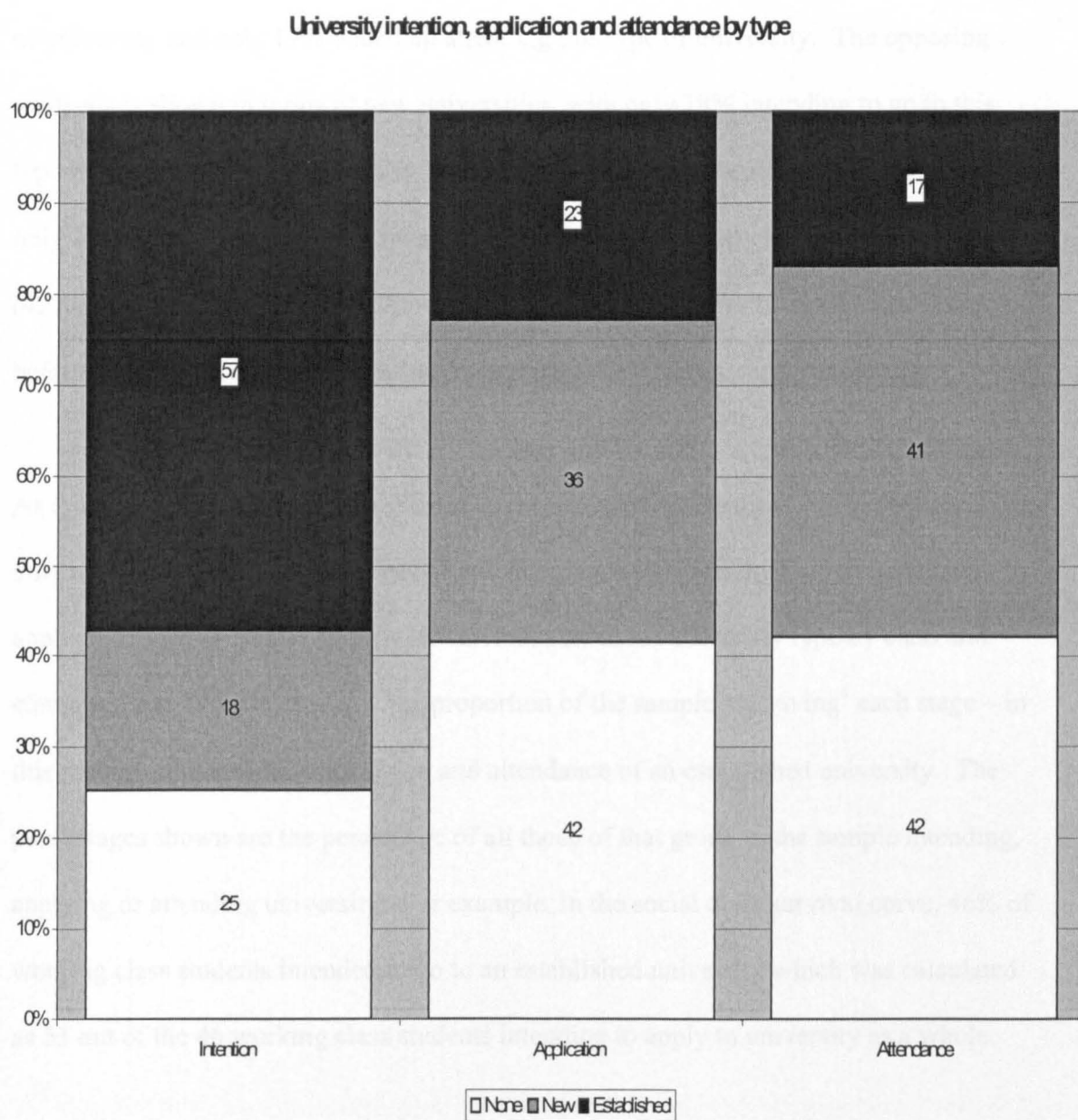
#### 4.4. UNIVERSITY TYPE

In an era of mass higher education there is some evidence that the type of university attended may be increasingly important. There are substantive economic advantages in attending an established university in terms of increased earnings and a reduced probability of unemployment (Hutchings, 2003: 169). Moreover, there is qualitative evidence that university choice is becoming more finely graduated in an individual's decision making, particularly by middle class students and their families (Ball, 2003a).

The influence of factors such as class, G-score, ethnicity and course type may be further explored by examining the type of university which students are selecting themselves into, or being selected for. When my survey was initially administered, students who stated that they were intending to go to university were asked which type of university they would intend to study at: 'Oxbridge' (Oxford or Cambridge), an established university (the University of Essex was cited as an example), a new university (the University of East London was given as an example) or another institution (open response). As discussed above, 'Oxbridge' students were collapsed into the established category and 'other' students were collapsed into the 'new' category. For application and attendance at university, a simple distinction was made between those applying for and attending new universities (those established after 1992) and old universities.



**Chart 9: Type of institution at various stages of the process of Intention, Application, and Attendance (N=155)**



As shown by Chart 9 (above) the proportions of students in the sample in terms of type of institution changes remarkably between intention and application / attendance. At the stage where student intentions were ascertained, more than half of the sample (57%) saw themselves as attending an established university, whereas only 23% applied to this type of university and only 17% ended up attending this type of university. The opposing tendency is shown in terms of new universities, with only 18% intending to go to this type of university but 41% actually attending this type of university. Similarly, although only 25% of the sample did not intend to go to university, nearly half of the sample (42%) eventually did not go. Although some of these may have been taking a year out before attending university, only one student expressed this intention explicitly.

As this data shows, there is a shift from intentions, through applications to attendance, not only in terms of going to university or not, but also in terms of the type of university applied to. Charts 10 and 11 provide survival curves for university type by class and ethnicity. Survival curves show the proportion of the sample 'surviving' each stage – in this case, from intention, application and attendance of an established university. The percentages shown are the percentage of all those of that group in the sample intending, applying or attending university. For example, in the social class survival curve, 46% of working class students intended to go to an established university which was calculated as 33 out of the 46 working class students intending to apply to university as a whole.

As can be seen from both the social class and ethnicity chart, there is a class and ethnic bias in terms of progression to an established university which worsens from intention,

through application to attendance. In terms of social class, the gap in terms of intention to go to an established university is relatively slight with 71% of working class students intending to go to an established university, compared to 79% of middle class students. This hardly represents a major aspirational gap. However, by the stage of application, the percentage of working class students applying to an established university falls to only 18%, whereas for middle class students 53% apply. By attendance, the percentage of working class students who end up at an established university falls to 16%, for middle class students the percentage is 38%.

In terms of ethnicity, Chart 11 indicates a similar bias. At intention, 65% of non-white students intend to go to an established university, compared to 82% of white students. By application, only 16% of non-white students apply to an established university compared to 50% of white students. By attendance, only 13% of non-white student applicants in the sample attend an established university, compared to 36% of non-white applicants. This contextualises the earlier finding which shows that non-white ethnicity is a positive influence on HE intention and application – this clearly does not mean that non-white students are more likely to attend an established university.

As these class and ethnic graduations show, the differences at intention are not great with roughly similar proportions of working class / middle class and white / non-white students considering established universities. However, by application and attendance, the proportion of working class and non-white students aiming at established universities

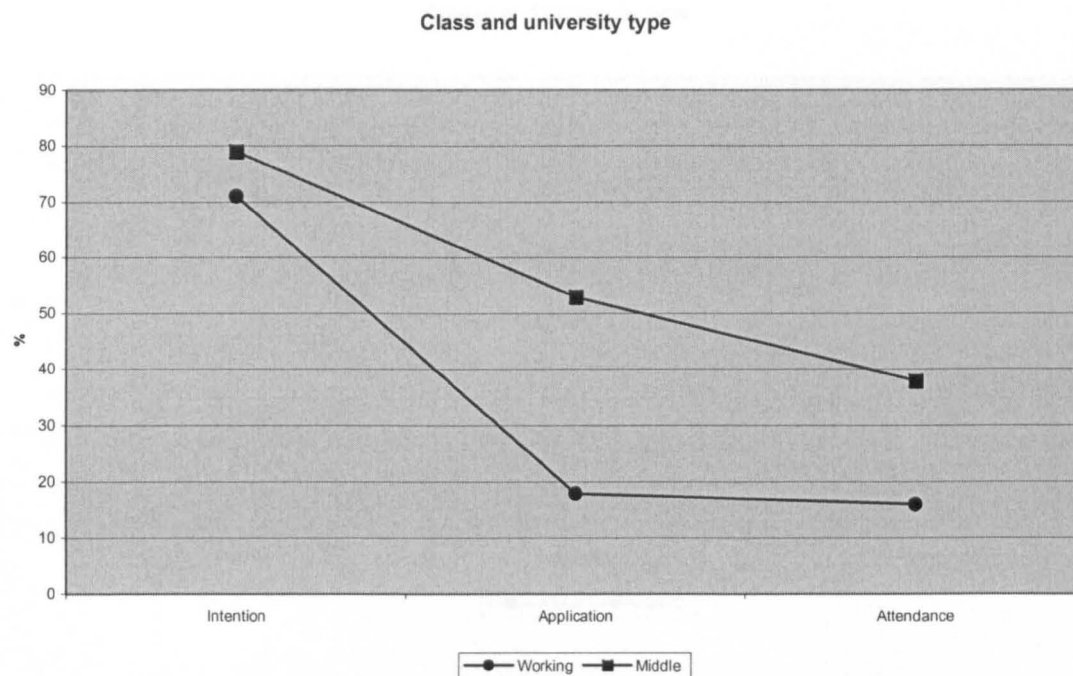
in the sample has fallen quite dramatically. For middle class and white students, there is also a fall, but the gradient is far less steep.

What these charts indicate is that the class and ethnic bias of university applications and attendance does not necessarily reflect the intentions of applicants, at least for the students in this sample. Again, without qualitative data, it is difficult to address whether this is a result of unrealistic expectations at the intention stage, although it is clear that students are not automatically selecting themselves out of going to an established university – whatever that means to them at this early stage in the application process.

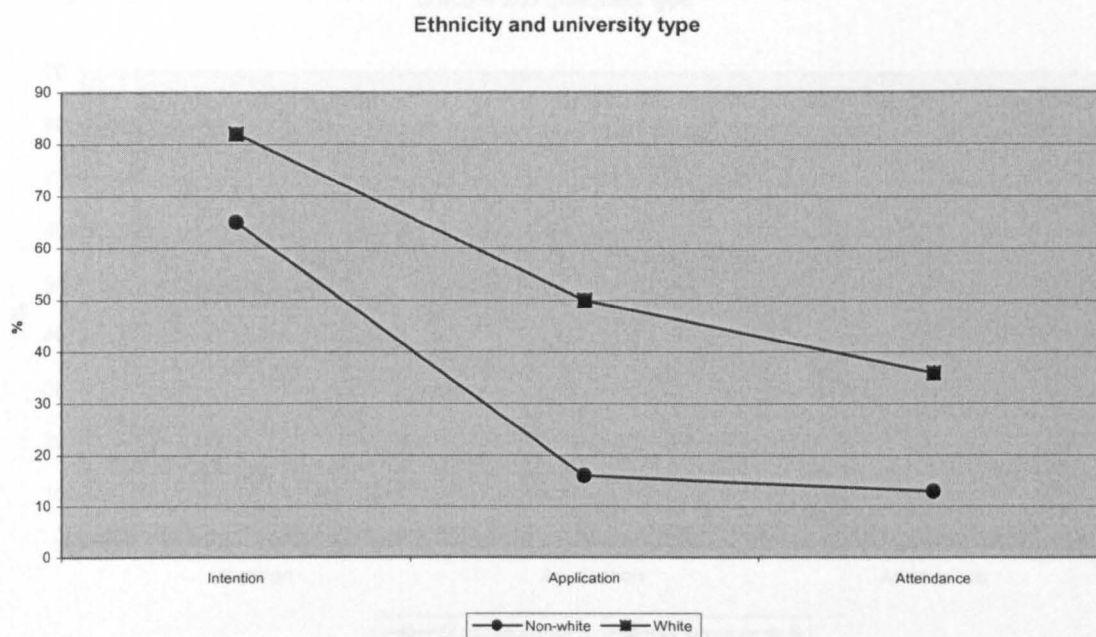
What the quantitative data does indicate, though, is a strong course and previous qualification bias in terms of application and attendance to established universities.

Charts 12 and 13 show survival curves by qualification type and G-score. As can be seen by Chart 12 there is a difference in intention to enter an established university between those on GNVQ courses (57%) and those on A level courses (88%). However, this becomes even more marked when applications and attendance at these universities is considered. As can be seen in Chart 12, only 3% of GNVQ applicants to university (in fact one of the sample) applied to an established university, with this person actually attending. This proportion is very small when compared with the 59% applying to and 44% attending an established university on an A level course. There is a similar pattern revealed in terms of previous qualifications as shown by Chart 13 with only 6% of those with a G score of less than 5 attending an established university.

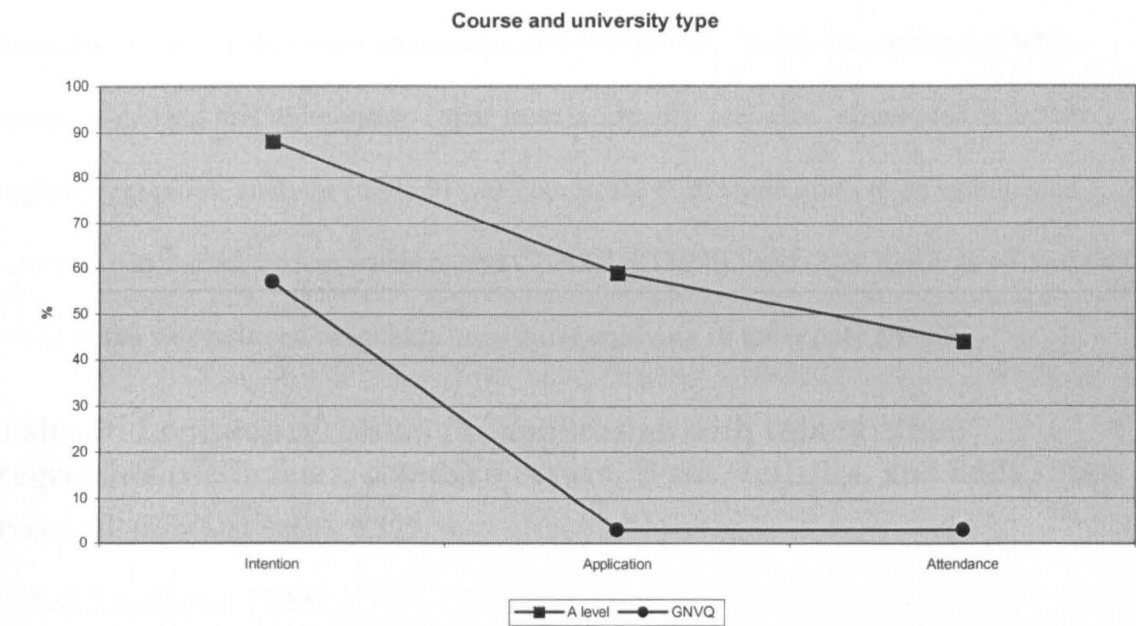
**Chart 10: Established university intention, application and attendance by social class (N=155)**



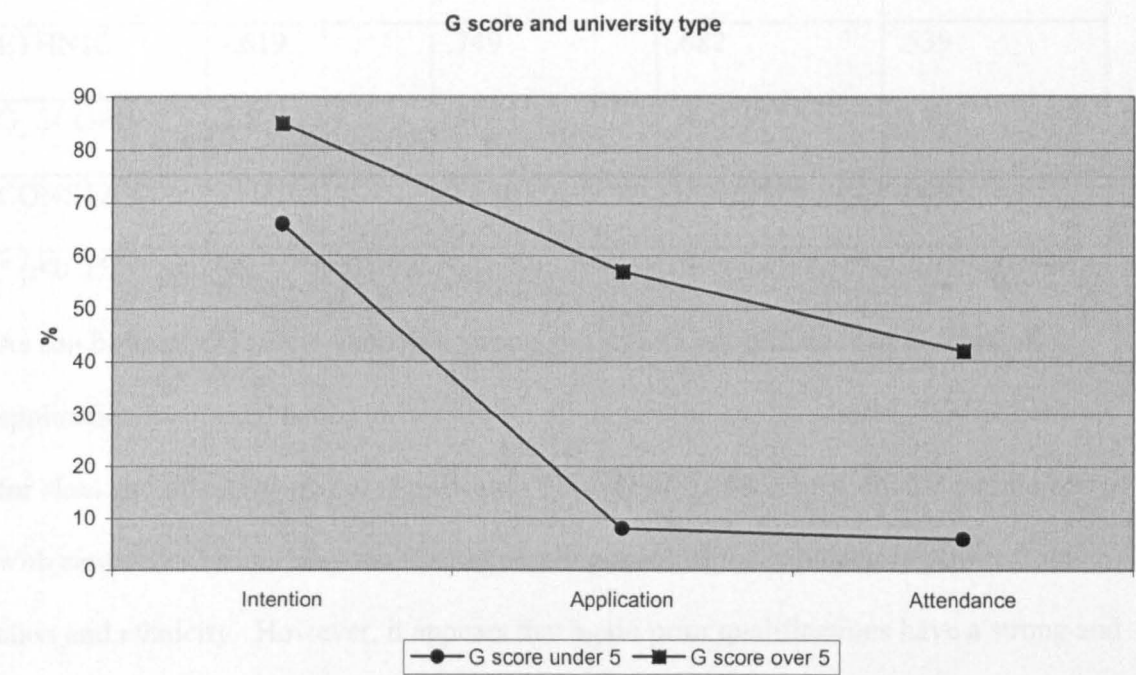
**Chart 11: Established university intention, application and attendance by ethnicity (N=155)**



**Chart 12: Established university intention, application and attendance by course (N=155)**



**Chart 13: Established university intention, application and attendance by G-score (N=155)**



As these charts show, there does appear to be a class, ethnic, course and previous qualification divide in terms of going to an established university. This widens from intention when one examines application and attendance. In order to determine what might be driving this relationship (or at least to identify probable influences), a further logistic regression analysis (table 9) was conducted with application to an established university as the dependent variable and CLASS, ETHNIC and G\_SCORE as co-variates. The sample was reduced to include only those applying to university (N=89).

**Table 9: Logistic regression for application with standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics, and odds ratios**

Pseudo  $R^2$  (Cox and Snell): 0.323

-2 Log Likelihood: 72.85

Percentage intentions predicted: 82.0%

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds ratio
CLASS	.552	.666	.668	1.737
ETHNIC	-.619	.749	.682	.539
G_SCORE	1.871	.459	16.629***	6.496
CONSTANT	-11.565	2.658	18.932***	.0001

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

As can be seen in Table 9, there is a strong and significant influence of G score on application to an established university for all those who apply, whereas further controls for class and ethnicity are not significant. This result, as the others, should be interpreted with caution – G score may in effect be stealing some of the explanatory power from class and ethnicity. However, it appears that again prior qualifications have a strong and significant influence, not only on whether an individual applies to university or not, but

also on the type of university which they apply to with a strong prior qualification bias in applying to and attending established universities.

#### 4.5. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have examined the influence of economic expectations and cultural factors such as class and ethnicity on progression to HE and on the type of HE establishment which individuals attend. Given the sampling limitations inherent in a mixed methods study of this nature, there is a limit to the statistical analysis which can be performed. However, descriptive statistics and logistic regressions have been employed to examine processes of intention, application and attendance. In terms of the intention to apply to university, the ex-ante rate of return to HE is certainly significant, as is being middle class (at least as measured by social classes 1 and 2) and of non-white ethnicity. Interestingly, there were no class differences in wage, debt or ex-ante expectations. The rate of return, class and ethnicity may be considered ‘ sleeper ’ effects in that there is certainly a close, though not exact, relationship between intention and application. Therefore, these factors have an indirect impact on application through their influence on intention. A further model of application to HE, though, shows the influence of prior educational attainment, namely the ‘ G score ’ as the only strongly significant explanatory variable, although non-white ethnicity is also influential. There are several explanations for the importance of G-score in application, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. G-score could signify to students their ability, or underlying motivation for HE, which is not necessarily apparent to them on starting their post-compulsory courses. Hence their courses are a process of information seeking – matching their own internal



characteristics with their attitude to attend university. Alternatively, the post-compulsory experience of those with a G-score of less than 5 may be qualitatively different from those with a G-score of greater than 5, perhaps through a process of qualification and resource 'rationing' (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Although the quantitative evidence for 'rationing' is tentative, as I will show in Chapters 5 and 6 this is triangulated through qualitative research by interview and ethnography.

Descriptive statistics seem to indicate that there are, indeed, differences between the courses taken between those with above and below a G-score of 5. With a G-score of below 5, individuals are more likely to find themselves on GNVQ courses, 2 A level courses and A level courses which are different from those with G-scores of greater than 5. When I examined the relationship between G-score and UCAS points there was a less favourable 'exchange rate' between those on GNVQ as compared to those on A level courses. UCAS points were also shown to have a large and significant effect on actually attending university, as might be expected.

Further evidence for the relevance of G-score arises when we examine the impact of this variable on the type of university which individuals attend. In terms of the intention to apply to established universities, there appears to be little difference between intention on the basis of class, ethnicity, course or G-score. However, when application and attendance are considered, differences become more marked. In particular, only two individuals in the sample with a G-score of below 5 ended up at an established university. A logistic regression of application to established universities with a sub-sample of those

individuals who applied to universities again showed the significance of G-score. Again, mechanisms of individuals reflecting on their own ability or motivation, or the rationing and labelling of students are potentially implicated.

This finding problematises a number of common sense assumptions concerning the use of G scores by students as an indicator of their ability, rather than by post-compulsory institutions to ration courses. For example, McIntosh states that rather than a certain GCSE score being ‘...a formal requirement set down by education authorities...the threshold is not a formal one, but exists more in the minds of the young people, the idea that prior success in the education system convinces them of their ability to obtain further success if they were to continue their educational careers beyond the age of formal schooling. Anecdotal evidence seems to support the latter interpretation’ (McIntosh, 2001: 79-80). Although McIntosh may be correct in this assumption concerning the decision to progress to post-compulsory education this does not necessarily mean that colleges do not ration courses according to GCSE scores. As my evidence suggests, there could be a supply, as well as demand, effect here – although McIntosh is correct in suggesting the need for further investigation of this topic.

Moreover, the importance of human capital or class (as measured by parental occupation) are not supported as *direct* mechanisms in this analysis. Although the rate of return to HE was shown to be significant at the intention stage of HE, it did not have an influence at later stages. The effect of parental social class was also not apparent at later stages of the HE process. This does not mean that these effects are unimportant, as intentions do have

some subsequent bearing on applications. However, they are less directly important than G-score and, subsequently, UCAS points. In the next two chapters I use qualitative techniques to attempt to disentangle these mechanisms and demonstrate the importance of institutional considerations in both rationing through G-score and ‘valorising’ the importance of G-score through course type.

#### **4.5.1 : Endpiece: How social class was used in this thesis**

Class is clearly an important concept in this thesis. Class is a contentious topic and there is debate in the general social science literature concerning the ways in which class should be operationalised (Crompton, 1998). Reflecting this debate, the concept of social class (class) was used in a variety of ways in this thesis – occupationally, as lived experience and as process. These multiple perspectives are necessary to understand the complex dimensions through which class impacts upon participation in HE (Archer, 2003b: 20). An advantage of a mixed methods approach, as outlined in Chapter 3 is that these multiple dimensions can be explored through the analysis of different types of data. These perspectives on class are not contradictory but rather help to explain both commonalities and differences within classes. For example, a student discussed in Chapter 5 (Tracey) from an occupationally working class family, due to her father’s earnings, found herself in a financially secure position. Her ‘lived experience’ of class was therefore different from other working class students – in particular, she was not debt averse. However, the ‘process’ of a poor experience at college led her away from an application to HE.

I will begin with occupational classification using a method which is derived from the work of Rose and O'Reilly (1997). In the questionnaire (Appendix 1), students were asked to provide the occupation of each of their parents. These occupational classifications were then coded into Standard Occupational Codes (SOC). These occupational codes were used to ascertain the highest social class parent in the household and a NS-SEC (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification) code for each household was thereby calculated. These NS-SEC codes were then collapsed into a 'short' social class ladder being the Registrar-General's SEG. Coding into the NS-SEC rather than straight into the Registrar-General's classification was a necessary step as the sensitivity of the NS-SEC to occupational descriptors means that it provides a finer graduation of class than occupational title. In order to illustrate this point I will provide a number of examples of the coding of student familial social class from the sample.

Abid's family was comprised of a father who was a doctor (SOC code 2211) and a mother who was a housewife (no SOC code). In terms of NS-SEC, a doctor is social class 3.1 (Higher Professionals), which is social class 1 (Professional) in the Registrar-General's social classification. In the case of Abigail, her father was a regional sales manager (SOC code 1132) whereas her mother was a salesperson (SOC code 7111). In terms of NS-SEC the father's social class was 2.0 (Higher Managerial) and the mother's social class was 5.0 (Lower Managerial). Taking the highest social class of the household gives a social class of 2.0 which translates into social class 2 (Managerial and Technical) on the Registrar General's social class scale. These are reasonably clear examples of classification by occupational social class.

One of the advantages in using the occupational classification constructed by Rose and O'Reilly (1997) is in terms of the ways in which status differences within broad occupational classifications are treated. For example, Sabeena's father was a *civil* engineer (SOC code 2121), Gails's father was an *industrial* engineer (SOC code 2128) whereas Robert's father was a *telephone* engineer (SOC code 5242). Although the job titles may appear similar, the NS-SEC code of Sabeena's father (3.1 – Higher Professional) translates into social class 1 of the SEG (Professional), the NS-SEC code of Gail's father (4.1 – Lower Professional) translates into social class 2 of the SEG (Managerial and Technical) and the NS-SEC code of Robert's father (7.4 – Intermediate Engineering) translates into social class 3m (Skilled Manual). This classification of employment in terms of different grades and responsibilities even within the broad category of 'engineer' means that class is not simply a matter of broad occupational category. It is also a function of the types of work performed and the differential status accorded to sub-categories of employment. Similar examples from the data could be chosen for job categories such as 'secretary' with different NS-SEC categories for PA / Secretary (4.1) and Secretary (7.1).

Following the construction of the Registrar-General's scale for all of the students' families, a demarcation was made between 'middle class' (social classes 1 and 2) and 'working class' (social class 3m, 3nm, 4, 5 and non-working). Of course, there are differences between each of these social classes in the sample but the division employed here is not arbitrary. In major studies of middle class educational advantage, including

progression to HE individuals from classes 1 and 2 or 'Professional' and 'Managerial categories' are classified as middle class (Power, 2000; Ball, 2003a: 181-182). These 'saliariat' have marked differences in employment benefits such as pensions, job security and autonomy as compared to other social classes (Goldthorpe, 1995: 314).

Importantly, in terms of participation in HE there are clear differences between social classes 1, 2 and other classes which means that there is a justification for treating these classes separately from others. For example, acceptance by HEIs of social class 2 was 37.6% as compared to 14% for class 3nm and 11.9% for class 3m in 2001 (Gilchrist, Phillips and Ross, 2003: 80). Similarly, whilst 90% of SEG 1 and 2 students who eventually attend HE do so before the age of 20 and 21 respectively, a similar proportion of SEG 3nm and 3m students do not attend before ages 24 and 22 respectively according to figures collected in 2000 (Gilchrist, Phillips and Ross, 2003: 77). Therefore, not only are SEGs 3nm downwards less likely to participate in HE, but the ages at which they eventually participate are often later than 18-21.

Following this argument, a contention in this thesis is that class 3nm should be classed as working rather than middle class. There are various literatures that support this decision. As stated above, there are distinct economic and social advantages which arise from being part of social classes 1 and 2 which translate into higher levels of and younger initial participation in HE. Moreover, the advantages which may have been gained in the past from those located in social class 3nm may not necessarily continue given the

proletarianisation of workers in the service sector and the globalisation of service industries (Braverman, 1974; Klein, 2000).

One of the problems in the classification of social class 3nm as either middle or working class is its heterogeneity. Examining the (albeit incomplete) data on educational qualifications gathered from 117 of the 155 students in this study there are similarities between SEG 3m and 3nm (see Table 10) but also between SEG 2 and 3nm.

**Table 10: Social class and highest parental qualification**

Social Class	GCSE or Level 2 equivalent (%)	A level or Level 3 equivalent (%)	Degree (%)
1	13	7	80
2	34	27	39
3nm	47	21	32
3m	50	33	17
4	63	25	13
5 and non- working	50	20	30

(N=117)

In Table 10 (above), qualifications have been grouped by level according to highest level of parental qualification. In terms of holding a degree, 80% of SEG 1 households have at least one parent who holds a degree, which is much higher than those in SEG 2 households (39%). The difference is less marked between SEG 2 households and SEG 3nm households where 39% and 32% hold a degree respectively. At the lower end of the qualification scale 3nm households are more like 3m households with almost half of 3nm households (47%) having one parent with at best a GCSE type qualification compared to 50% of 3m households. Far fewer SEG 2 households (34%) have a member holding only a level 2 qualification. Therefore, SEG 3nm households are 'like' SEG 2 households in that a similar number are in possession of a degree, but are also 'like' SEG 3m households in that around half do not have greater than level 2 qualifications. These figures should be interpreted with caution as there is some missing data on qualifications in this sample, but provide an indication of the educational heterogeneity of class 3nm.

The heterogeneity of this class is clear when one considers the categories of occupations in the NS-SEC which may be classified as 3nm in the SEG. These range from lower professional and higher technical employed and self-employed workers in 'new' service industries to those in semi-routine sales jobs. In terms of the sample under consideration, though, there was less diversity. None of the students surveyed came from families where the NS-SEC classification was at the 'upper end' of the 3nm scale such as lower professionals and higher technical (new) employees (4.2) or self-employed service workers (4.4). Rather, 3nm families fell into the categories of intermediate clerical and administrative (examples included post office counter assistant, secretary at a secondary



school, hairdresser), intermediate sales and services (examples included administrative clerk, insurance salesman) and semi-routine sales (examples included shop worker and retail assistant) with roughly equally proportions in each of these sub-categories.

In terms of descriptive statistics on educational level and occupation, then, there are some reasons for classifying 3nm as part of the working, rather than middle class. Although the number of families with degrees in this sample (32%) may lead one to place 3nm families as middle class almost 50% of these families do not have higher than level 2 qualifications – being almost identical to the 3n group. As this data is incomplete, a more convincing rationale for placing 3nm as part of the working class is in terms of the occupations represented in the data. All are towards the lower end of the NS-SEC classification, reflecting exactly those types of employment that have been cited as being vulnerable to proletarianisation, out-sourcing and poor employment conditions (Braverman, 1974; Klein, 2000).

In order to investigate further whether the decision to class 3nm as working class was justified, I re-ran the analysis shown in the first logistic regression model in this chapter (Table 5) with a new ‘middle class’ variable (NEWCLASS with mean 0.71, standard deviation 0.45) with 1, 2 and 3nm included as middle class rather than CLASS which uses social classes 1 and 2. In the initial specification of the logistic regression model CLASS was a significant predictor (at the 5% level) of the intention to enter HE. If the families in category 3nm are significantly different from those in social classes 1 and 2 (as claimed above) then it may be expected that a measure of class (NEWCLASS) that

includes 3nm would *not* be a significant predictor of intention to enter HE. This assertion is correct – NEWCLASS is not a significant predictor of the intention to enter HE as shown in Table 11 (below):-

**Table 11: Logistic regression for intention with standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics and odds ratios (with classification 3nm as middle class)**

Pseudo  $R^2$  (Cox and Snell): 0.160

-2 Log Likelihood: 147.497

Percentage intentions predicted: 74.7%

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds ratio
ROR	.054	.020	7.029**	1.055
NEWCLASS	.478	.518	0.850	1.613
ETHNIC	2.520	.784	10.333***	12.430
G_SCORE	-.018	.227	.006	1.018
CONSTANT	-.301	1.165	.067	.740

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

As shown in Table 11, NEWCLASS is not a significant predictor (not even at the 5%, or even 10% level) of the intention to enter HE. This shows that the inclusion of 3nm in the middle class category would obscure the effects of the highest social classes (1 and 2) on the intention to enter HE as shown in Table 5 (as CLASS was not a significant predictor of application or attendance then there seems little reason to additionally re-run these regressions for NEWCLASS). Therefore, given that much of the widening participation

literature uses social classes 1 and 2 as a proxy for the middle classes, the theoretical and empirical evidence that there is little status differential between 3nm and 3m, the particular nature of 3nm in this sample and the results of the regression analysis, then the classification of 3nm as part of the working class would seem to be justified.

However, although occupational social class provides an initial basis for considering class in this thesis, this does not preclude me from conceiving of class in alternative ways. The occupational categorisation of class can be enhanced by considering the multiple ways in which class can be experienced. Differences in wealth, location and resources and the ways in which these are experienced are all ways in which class may be envisaged. In the qualitative analysis in Chapters 5 and 6 I refer to individuals as 'working' or 'middle' class in terms of the occupational classifications considered above. However, this does not mean that the multiple ways in which class is experienced can not also be discussed. In the discussions in Chapter 5, for example, I consider ways in which disparities of wealth may lead to alternative perspectives. For example, I consider how (middle class) Stuart and (working class) Tracey's familial wealth enables them to adopt a more blasé attitude to debt than (working class, family on benefits) Helen. In addition, I consider how space may structure choice. For example, I consider how Claire (working class) does not find the reaction of the local community to studying to be favourable whereas both (middle class) Edith and (working class) Andrew have good social networks which facilitate educational progression. Although, these multiple class experiences are an important counterpart to more occupational considerations of class, subjectivities of class are also important in terms of the ways in which class position is

perceived and enacted. However, as noted in Chapter 3, institutions and objective circumstances should not be overlooked. In Chapter 5 I concede that cultural elements of class are important – the ways in which the middle classes consider HE as a ‘natural’ progression and mobilise their social networks to facilitate entry to HE are distinct from the working classes. However, I also show that working class students can consider progression to HE as possible and use different social networks to aid them in entering HE. Cultural or ‘peer’ group deficit is not a sufficient explanation for different progression rates of the students in this study.

Whether class is comprised of objective components (occupation, wealth, resources) and / or subjective components (habitus and aspirations), the ways in which elements of class arise and are reproduced are not independent from either policy or the actions of institutions, such as FE colleges. In Chapter 6, an additional perspective on class is the process of class formation (Skeggs, 1997) – in this study how the resources and attitudes of white, working class students are (not) valued in contemporary policy and by the college in which they study. This is an important adjunct to extending the analysis of class from differentials in terms of resources to ‘...an understanding of the symbolic economy, of the significance of representations and categorisations in attributing value that sticks to certain bodies, fixing some in place and enabling others to become mobile. We need to understand how these value processes become institutionalised beyond the economic’ (Skeggs, 2004: 77). As Skeggs (2004) argues, class can be envisaged not simply as an individual’s access to resources, but also in terms of how those resources (including representations of class) are valued by others. As Chapter 6 shows, the ways

in which the cultural resources (and qualifications) of the working class students at Thameside are (not) valued by the college has implications for their access to HE.

In conclusion, class is conceived in this thesis as a series of locations. Occupational classification is central to locating class in this thesis with good reason given its association with progression to HE. I have argued that social classes 1 and 2 are more likely to comprise a 'middle class' than social class 3nm. Class locations may also be construed through non-occupational characteristics of class such as wealth, location or subjectivities. These are employed in Chapter 5 to complement the occupational / status classification. It is important, though, to hold on to a conception of class as *located* (by processes) as well as location (as a series of assets). In Chapter 6, I explain how both in terms of policy and in the context of college life the cultural resources of white, working class students are devalued.

## **CHAPTER 5: PROGRESSION FROM FE TO HE IN INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS, MANAGERS AND LECTURERS**

### **5.1. INTRODUCTION**

As shown by other studies and through my own quantitative modelling in Chapter 4, progression to HE is a multi-stage, multi-causal process with potentially different influences taking precedence at each stage. Whereas economic expectations and the influence of parental social class may be influential at the stage of forming intentions, prior attainment is of significance at the application and attendance stage of the process. As I have explained, this effect of prior attainment can not be simply be reduced to 'ability'. Neither is it simply the result of accumulated disadvantage - the ways in which parental class position and economic disadvantage feed into educational disadvantage. Rather, prior attainment is used to ration HE opportunity with regard to prestigious academic courses and the academic (A level) track more generally. Only being of non-white ethnicity was of significance both at the intention and the application stage of HE. Even so, there was little evidence that those of non-white ethnicity actually ended up at pre-1992 institutions.

This modelling can tell us something about the complexity of the process by which individuals transfer from FE to HE. However, it does not indicate the mechanisms by which such processes may have such effects. Moreover, it does not reveal the ways in which processes may interact and combine. For example, the ways in which human

capital assessments are rooted in the (classed) networks of individuals. Or the ways in which the rationing of qualifications may be challenged by white, or middle class, parents.

In this chapter I explore the mechanisms behind progression from FE to HE. Firstly, I describe the locale of each college and its particular circumstance. This contextualises some of the local conditions in which the interviews are located and I also describe the characteristics of students in this section. Next, I examine the human capital assessments of students in terms of costs and benefits of HE as expressed qualitatively. This leads into a discussion of the role of other forms of capital - cultural and social in facilitating (or not) the HE transition.

Through this discussion it is clear that there are class differences in student orientation to HE. Middle class students have better knowledge of the costs and benefits of HE, they perceive the HE transition as more natural and are more likely to have access to the economic, cultural and social capitals to facilitate such a move. However, such class dichotomies are not the whole story. There is some similarity between middle and working class dispositions and (to a lesser extent) resources. Some working class students in particular were able to mobilise limited resources of economic and social capital to good effect.

This does not mean that class is unimportant in the transition to HE, particularly between the skilled working class and the liminal service (lower-middle) class. However, what is

crucial in making the difference is the role of institutional orderings within the FE colleges in giving (largely) the middle class the final push (to HE through academic qualifications) and the working class a further obstacle to negotiate (being in this case the GNVQ or less prestigious A level courses). The 'class strategies' employed by middle class students in securing access to prestigious HE institutions are therefore necessary, but not sufficient, in maintaining their dominant cultural position. Rather than the working class students interviewed considering that HE was 'not for the likes of us' there was ample qualitative evidence that colleges assumed that for certain students HE was 'not for the likes of them'. This is not to say that family influences are unimportant, but rather that these must be examined within the context of institutional orderings and cultures.

## **5.2. COLLEGES AND STUDENTS**

### **5.2.1 The colleges**

Although the three colleges in the sample: Thameside, Colne and West Essex were situated in the same county (Essex), there were marked disparities in their localities and student populations. Thameside College was located in a de-industrialised area of Essex with high unemployment and (positionally) poor social indicators in terms of crime, teenage pregnancies and health. The area was poorly served by cultural resources such as libraries, cinemas and restaurants aside from in an adjacent retail park which also provided students with a number of part-time job opportunities. Indeed, the Principal of Colne College referred to the area as a 'cultural Chernobyl' and significantly Thameside College was the greatest distance from any college in the study from a HE institution.



The student population of Thameside College was mainly white, with few students from ethnic minorities. Although many of the students came from working class families and were the first in their families to enter FE, there were a number of middle class students who had been either brought up in the area, or whose families had moved from London onto a new and growing estate. This estate was quite separate from the town and a local dispute had grown concerning preferential access to better schools in the area by new estate children.

Like Thameside, Colne was also a sixth form college. However, it was sited in a university town with a mainly white, middle class student population. The catchment area of the college also covered a number of council estates and there were a number of students at the college who were from working class backgrounds. Only a small proportion of students at Colne were following GNVQ programmes which was expected to remain a minority area of college provision. However, at Thameside, GNVQ was a significant and growing subject area. The Principal and Vice Principal at Thameside were keen to emphasise that GNVQ was the most suitable qualification for 'our type of student'.

West Essex College was the only exclusively FE college in the sample and its nature and size meant that a large number of subjects were taught. The college was the closest of the three to London and the student population was heterogeneous both in terms of ethnicity and social class, although the number of middle class students in the sample was lower

than either Thameside and Colne. A level was a minor part of the programmes on offer at the college when compared to a more extensive GNVQ provision.

All three of the colleges were considered to be successful by the FEFC in terms of their management, governance and teaching. None of the colleges was in a precarious financial position, but reductions in student funding had meant that all had taken measures to reduce budget deficits or achieve a small surplus. At all colleges this had involved decreasing contact time for teaching groups. At Colne and Thameside, the curriculum had been rationalised which had resulted in decreased subject choice for students. In particular, the option of re-taking GCSEs in order to enter an A level programme had disappeared at Thameside and had been severely curtailed at Colne. This was due to the perception by senior managers that GNVQ courses were a more appropriate option for students who had performed poorly at GCSE. In the case of West Essex a more radical restructuring of the college had been conducted with resulting redundancies. Staff morale was particularly low at Thameside and West Essex where a number of industrial disputes and strikes had taken place over conditions of service. Although this may not have had direct implications for student entry into HE, the impact on staff morale may have indirectly have contributed towards the positioning of curricula within the college. As I shall explain in Chapter 6, GNVQ teaching was least favoured by lecturers and seen by many lecturers as time to catch up on other work such as A level marking.

### **5.2.2 The students**

From the 155 students surveyed, twenty students were selected for further interview. These were selected to give a diversity of college type, course type and mix in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. The selection includes both 'typical' cases where a transition to HE might be expected (Middle class, Asian, high GCSE score) and did occur and atypical ones (working class, white, low GCSE score and made transition). Although these atypical transitions may be unrepresentative through their analysis we may consider exactly what mechanisms might be important in the HE transition.

Table 12 (below) provides anonymised details of the students interviewed with some key descriptive characteristics and their progression with regards to HE.

**Table 12: Details of students interviewed**

Pseudonym	College	Social Class	Ethnicity	Higher Education Destination
Dean	Colne	Middle	White	Established
Nikki	Colne	Middle	White	Established
Gary	Thameside	Middle	White	New
Nicola	West-Essex	Middle	White	New
Claire	Thameside	Working	White	None
Laura	Colne	Middle	White	Established
David	Colne	Middle	White	Established
Andrew	Thameside	Working	White	New
Robert	Thameside	Working	White	New
Steven	Thameside	Working	White	New
Helen	Colne	Working	White	New
Tracey	West-Essex	Working	White	None
Geeta	West-Essex	Working	Pakistani	New
Stuart	Colne	Middle	White	New
Jordan	Thameside	Middle	Mixed Race	Established
Jane	Colne	Working	White	Established
Louise	West-Essex	Middle	White	Established
Toni	West-Essex	Working	White	None
Mustaneer	West-Essex	Working	Pakistani	New
Edith	Colne	Middle	White	Established
Toby	Colne	Middle	Black British	Established

### 5.3. UNCERTAIN TIMES: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF HUMAN CAPITAL DECISIONS

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the ex-ante IRR to HE may explain the intention to attend university, but it does not explain why students apply to HE. Students with low ex-ante rates of return were as likely as those with high ex-ante rates of return to apply. Therefore, human capital considerations - at least relating to the monetary costs and benefits of HE - could be considered to be, at best, a sleeper variable in HE applications. There are two possible 'post-hoc' compensations which could be made for human capital theory in this instance. The first is that students adjusted their perceptions of the costs and benefits of HE during the year and that the application decision is therefore based on a more realistic assessment of costs and benefits. This would imply that students have rational expectation of the decision making process and systematically alter their expectations in the receipt of new information. However, qualitatively (as I will show below) there was little evidence that students were engaging in systematic information search and information concerning expected costs and benefits remained hazy, ad-hoc and (in some cases) non-existent. The second 'post-hoc' justification might be that students stressed the non-economic benefits of attending university and that these were part of a human capital assessment of the benefits of HE. Again, this can not be ruled out fully, although for the most part students stressed the monetary benefits of HE rather than consumption, health or citizenship effects.

From qualitative data, then, there was little evidence that students possessed a clear understanding of the financial consequences of HE progression. This contrasted sharply

with the quantitative findings in which students were able to at least make an estimation of the economic costs and benefits of HE, revealing the importance of a mixed methods approach. Frequently in interview, students would answer 'don't know' or 'no idea' when asked how much they would be earning in the future. Some disputed that a degree would improve their earnings at all, although for most it was the primary motivation for applying to HE. Those who had attempted to assess the monetary benefits and costs of progression utilised various ad-hoc strategies such as scaling their earnings from part time jobs, using parental income as a guide and gaining information from HE prospectuses. This would perhaps support a limited form of human capital explanation, although the validity of these mechanisms in arriving at an assessment of the student's own future earnings is questionable. In addition, basing future expected earnings on part time earnings, or on parental income, may be interpreted as a *reproductive model of human capital theory* in the mode of RAT (Rational Action Theory: Boudon, 1974). If parental social class is linked both to parental earnings (Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles, 2003) and student earnings in part-time employment (NUS, 1995), which in turn form a basis for the decision to apply to HE, then this decision is indirectly based on parental social class. However, there was little evidence for such a model in the data as students rarely stated that their HE decisions were made on a systematic analysis of costs and benefits. Moreover, there was no simple distinction between the economic expectations of working and middle class students. The exception to this was the occasional citing of student debt as a reason for not applying to HE, although students were rarely aware of the level of debt which they might be entering into.

For middle class students who were mainly following A level courses, parental earnings could provide a suitable basis for predicting one's own earnings although this was not always the case and there was still some uncertainty regarding potential future income. These four interview extracts are indicative of how, for some, the magnitude of parental earnings were a basis for comparison, although even these were treated with some apprehension:-

John (Interviewer): How much do you expect to earn when you finish the university course?

Dean: I have no idea...I would have to guess, although I guess I expect that it will be similar to that of my parents. I suppose that I will be working in business

Nikki: My earnings will be similar to that of my parents.

John: You don't think that you will earn more than your parents?

Nikki: Because of...inflation? (pause) I don't really understand how it all works....it seems that you just have to guess.

John: Do you have any career plans at present?

Gary (A level student): Not really, I have a rough idea about earnings from my parents who are in banking in London.

Nicola (A level student): No, I don't know. I do discuss things with my parents but they don't really have business jobs.

John: What do they do?

Nicola: They're both teachers and don't really earn that much (laughter)

For students without professional parents, although they were aware that they might be earning more following HE, they had no method of ascertaining how much more that might be. For example, Claire a GNVQ student from a working class background expressed a desire to attend university, but lacked reference points by which to assess expectations of costs and benefits:-

Claire: I did think about the fact that I might earn more if I went to university. My dad said that in the long run I'll get a good job. I suppose that it could be worth it, but I don't know how much it would cost...no one really seems to know.

For those students who *did* express some idea of how much they would earn following a university degree there appeared to be three main sources of information. As I have already suggested, parental earnings provided a reference points, particularly for those students from middle class backgrounds who generally, although not exclusively, possessed a higher qualification. The other two sources of information were the students' own part time jobs and information provided by HE institutions. Surprisingly, students interviewed did not claim that career's departments had been a source of information on potential earnings. Informal, interpersonal knowledge was a much more potent source of information, as has been found in other qualitative studies (Ball, 2003a)



Student part time work and other labour market experience sometimes provided a basis for thinking about future earnings. Through their part time work, students could ascertain ideas concerning how wages might translate into salaries and gain knowledge concerning the earnings of individuals with first degrees. For example, in discussion with two A level students at Colne College, both of whom came from professional families I discussed how they came to arrive at the answers concerning earnings in the questionnaire:-

John: When you filled in the questionnaire, how easy did you find it to predict the income which you would be earning in the future?

Laura: Quite hard really. I've not really got any idea, so I worked it out from what I would get if I was working full time at my part time job, but I wouldn't want to do that full time. So, I think....I just estimated basically how much I earnt each week from my part time job.

John: David, how did you find answering those questions?

David: The first ones were easy, I just took my earnings straight from my age because I had worked out what I would get if I had been looking for a job, but I didn't get one. So the ones which were recent, I found easy. I think I know that those without a degree reach a certain wage and then don't go much further from seeing the people when I did my work experience. They don't get the fat salaries that the others get.

Here it is apparent that for these students their short labour market experience provides a footing on which to ascertain judgements regarding earnings potential. It is not necessarily the case, though, that these comparisons are valid given that students were asked to extrapolate earnings to their future labour market positions. However, the nature of student part-time employment is structured according to social class (NUS, 1995). There was some evidence, though, that experience of poorly paid, service sector employment could be a lever to persuade some to apply for university. For example, Andrew, a GNVQ student from a working class background stated that:-

Andrew: The thing that has influenced me the most is not to be a shelf stacker or to work at McDonalds with the minimum wage. I did think of leaving at the end of this course, but a bloke said to me at work that any mug can stack a shelf for the rest of their life!

In the absence of information and general uncertainty regarding earnings, particularly for working class students, it seems that the newer HE institutions are attempting to provide this information as part of their recruitment efforts. For example, Robert and Steven, both GNVQ students from working class backgrounds had been strongly influenced by the marketing efforts of Southern University in forming expectations concerning earnings:-

John: Have earnings influenced you in applying to Southern?

Robert: It influenced me a lot, because after leaving the university the minimum you would earn is £30,000 – I found that out from the prospectus. That is after three years

experience. Accommodation costs did influence me, but looking at the prospectus, it was the better university with the middle range of costs.

Steven: Robert, that's not right...if you left without any qualifications you would be earning half as much...I was told at my interview that the least I would start on is fifteen grand.

Robert: ...thirty grand after three years, fifteen to start.

John: Do you think that everyone earns that much?

Robert: I suppose that they take an average, but, yeah, it's basically guaranteed...at least.

For at least some students, then, information on graduate earnings had been ascertained through parental comparisons, labour market experience and HE institutions themselves, although in the latter case it would seem that there is a marketing incentive for HEIs to exaggerate earnings following HE. It must be emphasised that these students were in the minority and most frequently there was a blank or confused response when asked about potential earnings. Although not a representative sample of students by any means, this evidence suggests that uncertainty and ad-hoc strategies rather than the more calculated strategies suggested by human capital theory may be more indicative of student decision making. However, concrete experience of the labour market in terms of part time jobs or parental earnings provide reference points although ultimately these are strongly classed.

### **5.3.1 Debt**

Accounts of student responses to debt might assume that working class students possess short time horizons and prioritise present consumption over future earnings. The prospect of earnings in the far future is not seen by them as sufficient to compensate them

for debt in the near. This in itself could appear to be a convincing explanation for the lower participation rate of working class students. The material component of debt, though, may be construed differently by various working class and middle class students although this construction is, too, rooted in their material circumstances. I will illustrate this point with examples of how three students from working class and two students from middle class backgrounds construe the impact of student debt in various ways. In the case of Helen, from a working class, single parent family, on an A level course debt is seen as the main disincentive for attending university:-

Helen: It was because of the fees...the debt...I don't know how much it was going to cost – I was worried about getting into debt. I did try to find out how much it would cost – I know it goes on earnings – but my mum doesn't have a job, so I don't know how much it would cost. Debts were the main thing that put me off uni. Me and my mum can't afford it. I feel responsible.

As can be seen from this transcript section, Helen was both unaware of the level of debt and sees debt as a disincentive for attending university. Parental unemployment is seen as another potential barrier, Helen was fearful that her family would have to pay for her debt and feels responsible for the family finances. Gender may have an influence for Helen in terms of perceiving herself in the role of looking after her mother. Here, interactions between gender and social class mean that debt is construed as a burden on the family.

For Tracey, also from a working class, single parent household, debt is seen as a necessary facet of life for which university is an unimaginative use:-

Tracey: I know that you have to pay debts or fees to go to university. No, I'm not influenced by that at all. It is just a waste of money – can you imagine paying for this (*gestures to GNVQ classroom*). I want to go abroad and see the world. I would go to Tenerife, work behind a bar and become a DJ or...a promoter...or something. I'll just put it on the credit card...I've got a loan at the moment. It doesn't bother me. It's something that I've always wanted to do from about a year ago. I don't like England, it's boring.

For Tracey, debt is inevitable yet inconsequential. Using debt for university, though, is not seen as being a useful purpose given her experiences in GNVQ. The alternative, travel and realising her ambitions in a creative field are seen as preferential uses of time. Whereas Helen is concerned about the consequences of debt for her family, Tracey construes it as an instrument to be used for her ambitions – not that they would include going to university. This partly reflects the differences in economic circumstances between the two families. Although both are from single parent families, Tracey's father's job as a builder would certainly give their family more disposable income. However, it also reflects differences in aspiration between the two women. In Tracey's case it is clear that her realisable set of possible futures has been expanded through exposure to clubbing and club culture – what Thornton (1995) refers to as subcultural capital.

For Geeta, a Pakistani student at West Essex College, debt was a regrettable but acceptable consequence of attending university. She describes the double discrimination incurred of being an ethnic minority student studying a vocational course:-

John: Do you think that there are any differences between A levels and GNVQs?

Geeta: A levels are for university and the higher professions, GNVQs are for weak students. GNVQs are discriminated against at university and amongst employers. Most Managing Directors have done A levels.

John: What do you mean 'discriminated against'?

Geeta: GNVQs mean that you work just as hard but that work is not recognised. It is confusing, they keep changing the qualifications and this means that they are not recognised. For example, in this college, we've got NVQ, RSA and GNVQ. Employers would rather have A level students – you've got to go to university to be equal.

John: Be equal?

Geeta: Most white people have got a degree, most A level students get a degree...there is no way that I am going to be paid the same with GNVQ. I really have to go to college – I don't care how much debt I get into – otherwise I'll just earn nothing, be a nothing. I'll probably be in debt for ever!

As this transcript section shows, Geeta believes that attending university is necessary to address labour market discrimination, both due to her ethnicity and prior qualifications. Like Tracey, debt is seen as an unavoidable consequence. However, in this case, the debt

is portrayed as a burden rather than a means to fulfilling educational aspirations – at least in terms of actually attending university. Geeta sees university as somewhere that she *has* to go to, otherwise she would ‘earn nothing, be a nothing’. This last comment has particular resonance with Reay and William’s (1999) work on progression to HE.

The ways in which Helen, Tracey and Geeta perceive the consequences of debt are seen to differ due to their material circumstances, educational aspirations and ethnicity. There are differences, then, in the ways in which working class students from different backgrounds construe the consequences of student debt. These perceived consequences are rooted partly in their material circumstances. For Helen, in a perceived need to look after her unemployed mother, for Geeta a desire to redress discrimination in the labour market. It would be therefore wrong to universally portray working class reactions to expected debt as homogeneous and predictable. It would, though, be equally incorrect to assume that this means that material factors are unimportant in working class student constructions of debt. Similarly, there was no predictable reaction of middle class students to the consequences of debt. There was some evidence, however, that the material consequences of debt were perceived to be less dramatic for the middle classes. Again, I will illustrate this point through extracts from interviews with two students to highlight areas of diversity and commonality.

Stuart, an A level student at the Colne College with a lawyer for a father was initially undecided as to the effects of debt as a factor on his decision to attend university:-

Stuart: I haven't got a clue (about attending university). I mean I have considered university so many times it is like one minute I want to go but it is like for the social life and just the fact that I wouldn't be with my parents and that's the independence, then I think no I will get into debt because I am useless with money and then I decide no I will get a job, but at the moment I am quite tempted to go to university just at the moment.

John: So does debt put you off?

Stuart: No, not really, my parents have actually worked it out for me and say that they will write off the debt.

John: Write it off?

Stuart: Yes, write off the debt. Like a reward for going to university.

For Stuart, debt does initially appear to be a factor which would dissuade him from attending university and in discussing this he seems to be following a loose cost-benefit framework. Interestingly, unlike Geeta, the labour market consequences are not paramount to Stuart – the benefits of attending university are portrayed in terms of social life and independence. These might be referred to as the 'non-pecuniary' benefits of HE. He does not perceive that he 'has' to attend university. However, significantly for Stuart, his incompetence with money management will not have serious consequences for his own finances, and debt will be written off by his parents. This 'writing off' of debt was also referred to in an interview with Jordan, a GNVQ student at Thameside College whose family owned a coach firm:-



Jordan: My mum and dad said they would pay for me, no problem. It's not the money, I just want a good career and university is the best way to get it. I want to travel as well, take a gap year, and they'll pay for that too. My mum and dad haven't been to university, but this doesn't put me off. They're really into my education – money's no object.

As other parts of the interview revealed, Jordan did not necessarily have the same cultural resources as Stuart, whose parents had attended university. However, commonalities of wealth between Stuart and Jordan enabled debt for both to be psychologically deferred to the parents rather than taken as a student burden.

In terms of debt, then, there are potential class differences in the ways in which debt is construed. Although there is little commonality in constructions of debt between the working class students interviewed, the impact of debt by all was seen to be on the individual and perhaps as a burden to the family. For middle class students, debt was not necessarily a consequence for the student, nor necessarily a burden. It is 'written off' or classed as a consumption expenditure 'they're really into my education – money's no object'. It would be wrong, though, to conclude that debt is the major disincentive in discouraging working class students from attending HE, at least in the way expected by human capital theorists. I have emphasised in this section that many students have only the vaguest idea concerning the economic consequences of attending university. The few who do attempt to assess the economic consequences use rather unelaborated and ad hoc strategies in arriving at a conclusion. Rather, the disincentive effects of debt are culturally driven – debt for working class students is often perceived as their debt, for

middle class students as a parental debt which is easily written off. Obviously, though, these different cultural perceptions are routed in economic circumstances, namely differences in wealth, although I have also shown how gender and ethnicity also have a role to play in structuring discourses of care and opportunity.

#### **5.4. THE NATURAL ORDER AND NETWORKS - CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL**

As I have shown so far, students are not autonomous, rational decision makers regarding HE progression as might be expected by human capital theorists although the theory should not be dismissed out of hand. However hazy such ideas may be, fear of debt and dreams of increased earnings may be motivators for progression. However, students also have a life outside of college and the family, and more recently the community has been seen to influence the HE decisions of students. In this section I will discuss the influence of family and community in influencing progression to HE. In doing so I introduce two other forms of capital - cultural and social capital.

##### **5.4.1 The habitus and its limits**

It has been noted elsewhere that there has been a shift in the educational aspirations of working class families concerning their children's education. Specifically, research in South Essex has revealed that there is a growing perception amongst families who have not attended FE or HE that continuing with education is increasingly necessary (Hayes and Hudson, 2001). I found in the course of the qualitative research that similar themes emerged through interviews with students. Many parents of all social classes and ethnic groups, were encouraging their children to apply for university. Class and ethnic

differences did not manifest themselves in terms of a discouragement effect or a desire by parents to stress the manual over the mental, although it could be argued that disparities in cultural and social capital between families acted to frame student choice.

The passion with which many working class parents stress the importance of HE to their children was surprising given the emphasis in culturalist theories of education to the self-selection of working class families out of HE. As I have explained in Chapter 2, a common theme in Bourdieuan writings on the 'new class paradigm' (Savage, 2003) has been the self-exclusion of the children of working class families from HE as arising from familial influences - 'not for the likes of us'. These discourses were not always borne out by working class student depictions of familial influences on their decisions. Andrew was particularly positive regarding the influence of his family on HE stating that his family would 'support me in everything that I do...my mum says that she would work day and night for me to go to university'. Although the burden which this might mean could potentially be a disincentive for some students, for Andrew it was not.

Andrew's parents see HE as something which they have missed out on, and that they want their son to experience. This desire to see their children gaining something which they had not was frequently mentioned by working class students. Parents were not only supportive, but could also be directive:-

Jane: I'm the first one from my family who could, and wants to go. My dad went out and got a trade as a gas service engineer, my mum could of but didn't. She could have

worked her way up – but now you need to go to university. They did try to push me, and it gets a bit annoying. They keep nagging. There is a person my dad does work for who did a similar course and someone across the road is doing a similar course at Suffolk University. It has pushed me a bit...I don't think I'd be able to do it without their support.

It is apparent that for Andrew and Jane, both from working class backgrounds, the mobilisation of resources is important. For Andrew, from a very nurturing and close family, his mother obviously provides a great deal of (possibly burdensome) support in terms of 'working day or night'. For Jane, the nagging of her parents is also strangely supportive. What is heartening from a theoretical perspective of Bourdieu, is that emotional work by parents has increased the cultural resources of students. Perhaps it would appear naïve theoretically, but appealing with verisimilitude to describe that Andrew and Jane's parents are displaying love (emotional capital) for their children in encouraging them to apply for HE. Certainly there is a reconstituted sense of the world cutting through any habits of previous generations. In Jane's case there is clearly an acknowledgement that there is a 'need' for her to go to university.

The intervention of middle class parents in their students' HE decisions was also apparent, and, as expected, it was obvious in many cases that greater cultural resources were available to them:-

Louise: My parents expect me to go to university because if I don't I will be like the first person in my family not to go, straight away. My uncle has just been to university and he really enjoyed it. My mum and dad give me loads of help, writing off for prospectuses, taking me for open days and things like that.

A curious parallel between discourses of working class and a number of middle class families was that a non-directive approach was frequently mentioned in student accounts. This is very different from the active 'class strategies' of middle class parents in other accounts (Ball, 2003a). Indeed, from the *middle class* students interviewed, Louise is the only one to mention concrete support in terms of taking her to university open days. Perhaps the extreme of this approach is realised in Toni's comments regarding her working class family's attitude to participation:-

Toni: My brother never went to college and he regrets it, so he said to me to go to college. At school in the last year, everyone went to college anyway, and that's why I went. No-one in the family has ever gone to uni, and I don't think that mum and dad are bothered whether I go or not. I couldn't leave my family – it's important to stay where I am – friends are important to me.

Toni's family are apathetic regarding her university prospects, and there are family and friendship ties to the area, which might suggest that strong social capital ties have a role to play. In a subsequent encounter I discovered that Toni had gained a job in a high street

bank and was pleased about forming new friendship networks outside of the area.

Mustaneer's family are also neutral regarding his future:-

Mustaneer: My dad offered me an apprenticeship at Fords which would have led to a good wage, but I said that I wanted to go to university and he said that it was okay. My parents say do what you have to do, they are supportive, but whether I go to university or not – there is no pressure.

One would expect a significant difference in the parental (educational) aspirations of middle class students would be in terms of taking an active interest in the HE decisions of their children. However, many discussions also revealed a neutrality in intervention but this apathy also masked an expectation that university was a natural route for their children:-

Edith: I have always wanted to go to university, though I think my parents just kind of expect it. They haven't said that that you have to go or anything. My brother's at university and it often comes up in conversation about where are you going to go and things like that.

John: What sort of conversations do you have?

Edith: Not really deep ones, we chat about what I might do...but there's no pressure, I don't think that they are pushing me.

Toby: I think my parents want me to go to university, maybe. They haven't actually come out with it, but I imagine that they would prefer me to go to university, because of a degree.

As can be seen from these extracts, although there has been no overt pressure on Edith and Toby to attend university, there are more subtle mechanisms at work. In Edith's case, for example, the counter-factual to her attending university is not mentioned – that 'where' rather than 'whether' you are going to go is discussed in the conversation is indicative of family expectations. In Toby's case, he imagines that his parents expect him to go. These accounts imply that the student's habitus – what they believe to be natural and expected – has been inculcated through subtle family processes.

Although there are limitations to this study's treatment of the family – students were interviewed in the college rather than their homes, and encounters with students' parents were serendipitous rather than selected, it does raise some interesting questions for both human capital theory and more culturally centered theories of progression. It does not seem, firstly, that all families are undertaking active information search, or even involvement in their children's HE choices as to 'maximise' family resources. Neutrality was a strategy of many, but that in itself can mask an expectation that the student should attend a 'recognised' HE institution, particularly in the case of middle class families. Secondly, there is a concentration of effort in some working families (and some middle class ones, too) in supporting their children in applying to university. This is contrasted with a non-interventionist approach that predominates in both working and middle class

households. This congruence between family patterns of intervention and non-intervention across classes seems to suggest that culturally driven theories based on family influence are problematic. However, there is a sense in which even types of intervention, or non-intervention may differ between classes. For example, Andrew's suggestion that his mother would work 'night and day' to pay for his HE course is a different level of financial support from offering to 'write off debt' for Stuart.

Emotionally, Andrew may carry responsibility for his mother's burden. There are echoes of Helen's worries concerning the impact of her potential debt on the family, in this account. Similarly, Toni, or Mustaneer's, families neutrality regarding their progression to HE is of a different order to Edith's where assumptions of her 'doing as she pleases' may be rooted in a covert understanding that this will eventually mean attending university. That there are congruencies between the behaviour of the working and middle classes with regard to HE progression, then, does not necessarily mean that the coded meanings of those behaviours are the same – although Bourdieu's habitus corresponds the two as being strongly related. It is apparent that the meanings behind behaviours are as important as the behaviours themselves.

It must also be noted that ethnic differences in family expectations were not as marked as class differences in expectations, which supports other evidence of this type (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000). Toni's working class family influences have more in common with working class Mustaneer's than they do middle class Edith's. Similarly, Edith's covert family expectations are more congruent with Toby's than Toni's. This is not to say that ethnicity is unimportant in influencing progression decisions – as revealed



by the quantitative data, being non-white is a significant influence on both intention and application. However, the mechanisms by which ethnicity influences progression were not found to operate through the family. The positive influence of non-white ethnicity through critical friendships will be discussed in the next section.

#### **5.4.2 Social capital**

Aside from the family, friendship networks and the wider community context could be seen to have a role in influencing progression. These network relationships could be classed as the 'social capital' of students. Literature on social capital theory concurs that there is no common understanding as to what it is, indeed the universal consensus is that the concept is contested (Schuller, Baron and Field, 2000; Green and Preston, 2001). For Bourdieu the use of social capital is primarily as a resource for individual social mobility. Social capital is relevant simultaneously as a resource for individuals and families for their own gain and social classes (or at least class factions) in maintaining and consolidating their position:-

'...the network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly useable in the short or long term'

(Bourdieu, 1986: 249)

However, this understanding of social capital as a resource for social mobility obscures some of the positive functions of such networks, particularly for working class students. For example, in Putnam's (2000) understanding of the term, social capital includes trust

as well as networks and such values may be as important to students aside from the structural (network) components of such capital. As I will show in this section, mutual support networks may be extremely useful for working class students in progression to HE (and in terms of preventing later drop-out – see Thomas, 2002).

As has already been indicated from Toni's and Edith's accounts, students differ in terms of exposure to the number of other people in their family who have been to university. For Toni, she would have been the first person in her family to go to university, whereas Edith would be the first person in her family not to go. This was also true in terms of friendship groups – it was more likely that friends of middle class students were going, or in some cases had been, to university and this could be a powerful influence. However, for working class students, friends often influenced behaviour, and groups of friends sometimes made a collective decision to apply to the same university. For example, some male working class students acknowledged the importance of mutual influence in applying to local universities:-

Robert: Friends have influenced me a lot...they say what they want to do when they grow up and you take that into consideration. The majority of my friends are going to university. Some of my friends of my age (18) are already at university. All of my friends in this class are going to the same university.

Steven: We are both going to Norfolk University...it will be good to know someone when you arrive, it will be a good laugh.

Friendship groups provide security and sharing of resources in the application procedure. They also enable us to consider that application to university may be a collective, rather than an individual decision, contrary to the assumptions of human capital theory which is based on the maximisation of individual utility. Interestingly, groups of friends applying to the same university was more common amongst working class students of all ethnicities. At Thameside, two groups of GNVQ boys applied to the same universities. One, because of their mutual interest in sport, and the sporting facilities of the university, the other, because of their mutual interest in computing. At West Essex College, many ethnic minority (and white) working class students decided to remain at the college to take the HND in business and, again, this mutual decision stemmed from friendship groups. As one said:-

Mustaneer: I decided to stay at West Essex, because all my mates are here...we can have a laugh and wind people up. The work's easy, it's an easy life.

This pooling and use of the limited resources available by these students in achieving access to university has parallels with the efforts made by working class parents in supporting their children. There, limited cultural capital was employed in support, in this context, limited social capital is used to pool risk and provide mutual support. In each case, the creative and strategic possibilities of limited forms of capital are employed.

Decisions are also made in the context of a community wider than friendship networks. Reference is made to strong social capital links in an area as a possible disincentive to educational progression (Schuller, Baron and Field, 2000). Students may be fearful of losing their friends if they choose to go to university. As Granovetter (1973) discusses with relation to the labour market, there is strength in weak ties. With relation to HE, weak ties may be easier to break and encourage participation. There is a covert assumption in this argument that working class students have stronger links than middle class students with their friends. However, as discussed above mutual applications to HE may provide students with a sense of security. Moreover, escape from current friendships and the formation of new friendships may be an incentive for application:-

Helen: I've seen what college life is like and that is good – I've seen university and it's similar so I've said 'I'll have some of that!'. To be honest, I've got bored here – I'm in a shit relationship, so I just want to start again, make new friends and get away from here.

There were geographical, as well as social network aspects of the areas which also gave rise to differential participation in HE. For students at Thameside, there was often narrow geographic mobility: many students had not even been to London, a 40 minute journey by train. The influence of service and retail culture on students was palpable. Students would work at one retail park, shop and eat there, and after getting changed progress to pubs and nightclubs at another. There was certainly a class bias in what Ball, Maguire and Macrae (1998: 147) refer to as student socio-scapes with middle class students more likely to travel more widely. In the town where Thameside was located, there were

noticeably middle class areas, one of which was a large 'gated community' which was setting up its own school and sixth form centre for its residents. However club and leisure culture could act to widen the horizons and experiences of working class young people. Whilst perhaps not influencing the decision to attend university, nightlife was an influence on location choice for a few.

Student identity, and academic activity, was sometimes influenced by peer pressure in the local community around both Thameside and West Essex with high levels of car crime on the college campuses and open drug dealing on both. Dealing in illicit items was a way in which a minority of poorer students supplemented their income, and one student was rumoured by some to be funding her way through university by selling 'e' (ecstasy tablets). Working class students sometimes faced criticism when they tried to study:-

Claire: I went to the library and everyone laughed at me. All my friends laughed at me!  
Nobody goes to the library in Stowell – they think you're a brain!

Compared to West Essex, which was on the borders of London and Thameside, located in a heavily industrial area, Colne College was located in a large prosperous university town with a large number of cultural resources such as theatres, cinemas and arts centres. The college made use of the university in terms of organising visits to talk to HE students and find out about university life. Trips were also organised to Oxford and Cambridge universities.

In summary, cultural and social capital are of some significance in determining student HE decisions. In terms of behaviour – whether parents are supportive or not in influencing student decisions – there were few differences between middle and working class families. Qualitatively, though, there were differences in the meaning of support or non-support across class boundaries. In particular, seemingly non-interventionist middle class parents were giving the covert message that their children were expected to attend HE. Bourdieu's concept of the habitus and a conception of 'embedded' and 'contingent' choosers (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 1998) are useful here. Both verbally, and seemingly non-verbally (through the use of silences by parents on the subject of HE), certain dispositions and perceived expectations are inculcated into the student. However, the creative possibilities of working class parent intervention should not be underestimated. In terms of mobilising what might be called their 'emotional capital' (Reay, 2000) there is evidence of close support. Work is required by these families in accumulating capital. This is both physical and mental, in terms of working to generate economic capital and emotional, in terms of providing support. The aim of this work is to transfer economic and emotional capital into educational qualifications, and thereby increase cultural and economic capital for their child. In addition to cultural capital, there is also evidence that parts of social capital, at least friendship networks, may be implicated in the HE decision. Middle class students are more likely to have experience of friends and relatives who have attended university, although whether this translates into a disposition to attend HE is not clear. I have also shown how the friendship networks of students can be used in making a collective decision to attend the same university. Again, the concept of work and the transmutation of capitals is useful here –

social capital can be transferred into educational qualifications. However, locality in terms of sense of place is more than social capital, and in the area surrounding Thameside College the service industry formed an interconnected work and leisure structure which constrained the socio-scapes of working class students. This could be a further influence on the educational aspirations of these students towards a career in the service sector rather than HE. One must remember, though, that discourses of escape were also apparent in student transcripts and that locality can not be seen as determining. Obviously, further ethnographic research of student leisure and working lives would be required to investigate these external influences on student decisions.

### 5.5. RATIONING OPPORTUNITY

As I have shown in Chapter 4, GCSE score had a strong influence on the decision to apply for HE. However, this influence was not seen in the initial intention stage to apply for HE where expectations of attending HE were high amongst students of all G-scores. This GCSE effect was particularly pronounced for the decision to apply to an established university, but it was also significant in the decision to apply for any university. Moreover, an effect of a 'threshold' GCSE score of 5 was identified as important in determining whether a student applied to HE or not.

From models centered around notions of human or cultural capital the influence of GCSE score on progression is connected to notions of self-monitoring or internalisation through the habitus. For human capital theorists, education is an experiment in matching one's talents to the educational opportunities available. Therefore those individuals with low G

scores might rationally decide that HE is not for them. For Bourdieu, educational qualifications affirm individual and class factional social positions (Bourdieu, 2003: 142). Lack of qualifications impedes one's confidence (as well as one's objective chance) of entering HE. However, from interviews with lecturers and managers it was apparent that 'choice' of qualification was a misnomer and that individuals were not self-selecting themselves into the vocational route or A level. Rather, there was strong pressure on working class individuals from colleges to follow this route with implications for future progression to HE.

#### **5.5.1 The illusion of choice**

Opportunity to pursue one's course of choice – whether A level, GNVQ or another course, was explicit in college marketing communications and was expressed strongly by managers in interviews. The process of course choice was portrayed as one of negotiation with students, parents and teachers discussing course options before making an informed decision as to which options would suit the student best. This discourse of negotiated, deliberate, rational choice was in stark contrast to the actual practice of course choice. One of the senior managers at Colne College described his analysis of the process:-

'Well, we did some research really to try and find out where they got their ideas from, or what things they thought of to try and prioritise what was important and who was influential in what decisions they made and they told us that the open evening was the single most important factor so we do try and encourage staff to take that on board and see it as being exactly that if you are going to start recruiting people to your subjects this



is a key point for you.....that is also an opportunity for parents to get information as well and probably that's why it's so influential is that that's not your only contact with the student but it is the contact with the parents and I suspect that has an ongoing feedback into the student's decision that they are saying things like 'do you remember when we went to see the open evening and we were really impressed by that department', and I think that influences them quite a lot. The next stage is to go and see them at interview by which time of course they will have filled in an application form and it's surprising how little changes after this stage...So they have an interview hopefully that agrees some form of programme and in fact we write them a letter which indicates what their course is and says to them if they want to change it they should basically write to us and tell us. The next step from that is after they have had their offer letters they are invited in for another date in June, at the end of June after they have done their GCSEs. When they come in, they are given a copy of their timetable and asked if they want to make changes on it. Inevitably, there are a lot of changes at that stage because people are often getting down from the three or four subjects they have on their interview down to their final subjects that they want to hold for September.'

(Mark, Vice Principal, Colne College)

This interview segment reveals that the process of course choice is believed to be informed by discussion and negotiation. The open evening is a forum for the college to promote courses on offer, which are then thought to form part of the student decision making process. Significantly, this is believed to be a period of negotiation and discussion between parent and student, which may reflect assumptions regarding the

middle class intake of the college. The interview and application process are then seemingly orientated around the notion of the student as the nexus of choice 'When they come in, they are given a copy of the timetable and asked if they want to make changes on it'. Notions of student sovereignty in the decision making process, with the college serving as the mechanism for the realisation of these choices are additionally emphasised in college promotional materials:-

'Many students will not have decided on a particular career or higher education route to follow beyond Thameside. Do not worry if you are in a similar position, this is not unusual. With the help of tutors and specialist advice from the careers advisers you will be able to select a broad base of subjects that will enable you to make the most of your talents and abilities, your subject strengths and interests and future careers and higher education plans'

(Thameside College, promotional material)

A later assessment of the decision making process at the college partially relocates the balance of decision making from the student to the college. However, the student is still notionally stated to be in charge of the decision made:-

'If you have been offered a definite place at Thameside then it will still be open to you even if your results do not come up to expectations. Your course will be adjusted according to your grades when you come to us in September. Some of you will need to take your GCSEs again, whereas others will want to change to another kind of course.

Your tutor will help you in making this decision when the time comes.

Some of you may have to stay an extra year to accomplish the goals you have set yourselves. Many students take this option and go on to make a successful entry into university or employment.'

(Thameside College, promotional material)

These notions of informed and deliberative choice can be paralleled with marketing models of consumer decision making which have infused careers research from consumer psychology (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). The routes to courses proposed by the colleges are far from a 'McDonaldised' version of consumer choice as supposed by sociologists such as Ritzer (1993) with the college responding quickly and uncritically to student demands. Colleges are careful to portray the process of decision making as the result of the sort of deliberative choice which might be made in choosing the student's first car, with parents actively involved in the decision making process and the college acting as trusted 'dealer' in the course chosen. However, it was apparent that in practice the college retained market power in being the final arbiter of course allocation.

Paradoxically, the marketisation of colleges which was partially intended to increase consumer choice instead suppressed and subverted that choice – at least as it related to access to academic and vocational qualifications. In particular, the decision as to which course the student should follow was largely made by the institution on the basis of ability – represented by GCSE results. Taking Thameside College as an example, if GNVQ courses were oversubscribed then suitably qualified students were persuaded to

move on to A-level. Similarly, if GCSE results were too good then students applying for GNVQ were to be persuaded to move towards A levels. This process had real consequences for the allocation of places on A level as 89% of students on GNVQ courses had previously decided to apply for A level programmes. The basis for this process of course *rationing* similar to practices in secondary schools (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) was linked to a desire to maximise funding and reputation.

As in all of the colleges studied, historical data was used by each college to predict chances of success at A level through using a formula based on an average of GCSE scores with 8 points awarded for an A\*, 7 for an A, 6 for a B, and so on. As previously explained, this variable was known as the G-score. The guidelines given to staff on enrolling students were explicit regarding the importance of this variable which was the final determinant of course choice:-

‘Students with a G score of less than 5 should be strongly persuaded of the advantages of enrolling on a GNVQ course whatever their previous course choice’  
(Staff Guidelines on enrolment, Thameside College)

This message was repeated by management at various levels of the college:-

‘The message from management is when you get these borderline students you should sign them up for GNVQ. If they can be persuaded, then that’s the way they should go. If they can’t be persuaded, then send them to me.’

(George, Head of Faculty, Thameside)

The process of rationing operated in both directions in that students with good GCSEs who wanted to follow a GNVQ programme were often persuaded to follow A level programmes. Lecturers and managers were aware that this explicit ruling operated in the college. Whilst they would not resist or oppose the ruling directly, they were clearly aware of the marketing priorities of the colleges:-

‘Better students are simply unable to do GNVQ, students with 6 / 7 GCSEs are persuaded to do A level.’

(Anne, GNVQ teacher, West Essex):

‘....from my point of view having sold them GNVQs we’re selling them back A levels and it’s not appropriate’

(Sarah, Head of faculty, Thameside):

Similar processes operated in all colleges although perhaps the ferocity with which the process operated was greatest at Thameside as the mean G score of students in the sample was close to the academic ‘cut off’ value of 5. At Colne, the mean G score of students was much higher, so very few students needed to be persuaded to follow the vocational route. At West Essex, the opposite scenario operated with many students aware that their low G scores would not allow them to gain access to the limited range of A level courses at the college.

It was apparent that the discourses of choice explicit in college marketing and management accounts of decision making were not realised in practice. Producer sovereignty operated in the colleges and students were loath to attend a lesser status college in the area where the chances of failure were thought to be higher. Few protests by students or parents were made against college decisions and formal processes did not exist for the resolution of such disputes. This meant that the managers at Thameside College resolved disagreements on the basis of 'favour' in a somewhat feudal manner. For example, in one case where the student was initially placed on a GNVQ course, parental protests to the college in the form of telephone calls led to the student being reluctantly placed on an A level course. Lecturers were told to accept this student on a 'trial basis' on the A level business course. However, in a similar case where the student themselves protested about not being allowed to do A levels the choice was made clear to them:-

'I came here to do A levels in Maths and Physics, but when I arrived my tutor asked me to see careers. They told me that I had to do GNVQ, and perhaps then I might be allowed to do one A level in computing. I was well pissed off because other people had been allowed to do A levels. So I went and saw Paul (Vice principal) and he said that if I didn't like it I should get a job with training as I am older than everyone else and might have a problem with people being younger in the same class and also with people in authority. I think that he meant the teachers, but he seemed marked that I had come to see him. I suppose that GNVQs are for people who can't cope with A level'

(Andrew, reluctant GNVQ student at Thameside College)

The potential influence of parental pressure on the decisions made by Thameside has parallels in the area of school choice in terms of differences between alert and inert parents. In particular, Andrew's working class parents were non-interventionist ('inert') in terms of the decisions made by the college. The message from the college to Andrew is that raising the issue of course allocation is an attitudinal problem, and that if he did not take the vocational option offered to him then the labour market was the only viable route.

Moreover, within vocational or academic routes, choice was rationed to a finer extent. For students on the A level route, there were a wide range of programmes available and the college was prepared on occasion to run groups with low numbers of students in order to maintain the college's academic profile. This was particularly true for those subjects which are the province of the educated middle classes such as French, Philosophy and Ancient History. Despite the potential number of GNVQ courses which could be offered by the colleges, constraints of funding were perceived to operate more strongly and only courses believed to be optimal in terms of profitability were offered. At Thameside, choice was restricted to Business, Leisure and Tourism or Health and Social Care. If numbers were poor on one of these routes, then students would be persuaded to switch between courses in order that resources were fully utilised. At Thameside, as Leisure and Tourism was undersubscribed in 1998, a group of business students were told that they would now be studying Leisure and Tourism GNVQ. The alternative for these students

was to study business at a college with a poorer standing in local league tables, and most (95%) decided to stay at Thameside. That funding constraints figured more for the viability of vocational than academic student options at Thameside was indicative of the lower status of the vocational options.

In summary, colleges exhibited a large degree of market power over whether academic or vocational routes were followed by their students. This power was not absolute, in that parental challenges could act to change college decisions, but students had limited opportunities alone to alter their course choices. Course allocation then provided the routes by which student cultural resources were legitimised and hence a powerful determinant of progression to HE.

The effect of the rationing of opportunity on progression to HE was multi-causal. In Chapter 4, I showed that for students following GNVQ programmes, even for those with a G-score of greater than five, the opportunities of converting their previous GCSE qualifications into UCAS points were not as great as for A level students. Although students with very low G-scores may have gained more UCAS points through GNVQ than A level, those with a G-score of greater than 4 may have gained more UCAS points by following an A level course (see Chart 8).

However, this is not the whole story and there are a number of other mechanisms by which students allocated to low-status academic, or vocational courses, were disadvantaged by their status. In Chapter 6 I discuss the ways in which vocational status



legitimised the labelling of working class, vocational students at Thameside as pathologically different from their counterparts on A level courses. At West Essex, too, lecturers referred to vocational courses as being suitable for 'our type of students' who were 'less motivated' and even 'lazy'. As most of these students were black, a possible conclusion could be that this represents a subtle (or less subtle) form of racism. Although this labelling of black students was not so obvious at the Colne College (perhaps due to their low numbers), the relegation of vocational students to a separate part of the college served to highlight their position. Lecturers, too, were very much aware of the status distinctions between different A level courses and particularly between A level and GNVQ. Students on vocational options often had to make do with younger, less experienced teachers.

There was also a difference between the preparation of students for HE. For example, although visits were arranged to universities at both Colne and Thameside, those students studying GNVQ were not included in the visits as a whole, although 'suitable' individuals were approached for inclusion on the visits to the local university, but never on the visits to more prestigious institutions. Rather than expand student horizons, the selective nature of these visits may be expected to legitimise existing disparities between those who already intended to follow a HE route, and those who did not.

## 5.6. CONCLUSION

As has been seen in this chapter, human capital theory can only partially explain the decisions made by students in the sample. Although economic considerations regarding

earnings and debt are occasionally mentioned, students have a poor idea concerning the expected costs and benefits of HE and certainly do not combine these in a systematic fashion to make a rational calculation. Moreover, the embedding of information concerning HE costs and benefits in student social and cultural lives means that monetary values can not be readily extracted (or abstracted) from this context. For example, the quantity of student debt for Helen can not be extracted from qualitative concerns regarding the burden which it would place on her single parent, unemployed mother. Similarly, the use of parental earnings as a basis for assessing one's own earning potential can not be abstracted from the student's own class background. The embedded nature of economic costs and benefits within the cultural lives of students means that an 'information deficit' model of student choice is not necessarily able to explain lower participation rates of working class students in HE. Although middle class students arguably have access to superior information regarding potential earnings and engagement with other individuals who have attended university, the cultural context of this information is as important as the quantity of information. For example, whether debt is seen as a 'burden' to the family or to be 'written off' by the family may be as important as the quantity of debt expected.

Surprisingly, it was found that there was less difference between the 'habitus' and social capital between students of different social classes than might be supposed. In particular, parents and students from working class families were able to use emotional resources and social networks to facilitate the transition to HE. This may be due to the lack of substantial social class gradient in terms of the students interviewed. For example, there

may be little difference between the resources and 'habitus' of the skilled working class and the lower middle classes (Brooks, 2003). None of the students interviewed came from truly 'upper middle class' families as in other studies (Ball, 2003a; Power, Edwards, Whitty and White, 2003) which may have produced more heterogeneity in the accounts than might otherwise be expected. At the very least, though, this evidence tends to warn against essentialising differences between students of different social backgrounds.

Although there were not marked differences in 'habitus' or use of social networks, in terms of treatment by colleges, there was significantly different treatment of those (largely working class or ethnic minority students) with a G-score of below 5. As I have shown, students also had little agency concerning enrolling on academic or vocational pathways. Although discourses of choice ostensibly featured in student prospectuses and in interviews with staff, other findings revealed that in practice students experienced little choice. The maximising agencies with regard to educational costs and benefits were the colleges, rather than the student 'consumer'. These decisions, on the basis of former educational qualifications, were difficult for those placed on the vocational route to resist given the imbalance of power between the college as local monopoly provider of educational opportunity, and the student's own cultural resources. Opportunity to attend HE was therefore rationed, and students found themselves in the position of being able to choose between only a small number of newer, local, HE providers. As I will show in the next chapter, this process was particularly pernicious for those students in an area where there was little previous representation in HE.

## **CHAPTER 6: PROGRESSION TO HE IN A ‘COOL SPOT’: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS**

### **6.1. INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I focus on the circumstances of a particular group of students in their transition to HE – white, working class students studying GNVQ at Thameside College. As shown in Chapters 4 and 5 these are the least likely students to have attended HE from the sample. Indeed, the area in which Thameside was based was considered by nearby HE providers as a ‘cool spot’ for HE participation more generally. However, although this is a particular case involving themes of rationing and the employment of various capitals which have been discussed in previous chapters it is also more general in that in order to understand the situation of students at Thameside it is also necessary to consider more general themes of class and ethnicity. In particular, how the working class of all ethnicities, including the white working class, have been pathologised both in terms of their class and ethnicity in policy discourse. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a more general discussion of race and class and the current positioning of these variables in policy discourse. This introduction of ‘new theory’ is necessary in order to understand the specific situation of these students. In particular, the field in which capitals are exchanged and valued, rather than capitals being of any intrinsic value of themselves (Colley, 2003), is of paramount importance. This includes not only the FE college but the policy and historical context in which the college and its students are located.

I start by discussing how ‘whiteness’ and ‘class’ have always been historically intimately associated and how in policy terms ethnic aspects of class have been highlighted and pathologised. This includes a pathologisation of working class white areas, such as the area around Thameside College. I then consider how through processes of ‘community profiling’ the management of Thameside decide upon and act to valorise discrimination against working class students of all ethnicities, including the white working class. This ‘cools off’ student expectations regarding their progression to HE (Banks, 1992).

## 6.2. WHITENESS VISIBLE

Much of the early sociological literature on vocational further, or post-secondary, education was concerned with the reproduction of class alone, or how class interacts with race and gender (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980; Taylor, 1984; Avis, 1984; Skeggs, 1988; Banks, 1992, Riseborough, 1992). In this literature, whiteness as a racial category is implicit, but rarely commented upon in terms of its interaction with social class ‘..the slippery tendency for whiteness to go unidentified’ (Nayak, 1997: 57). Conversely, relatively few studies examine the specificity of white working class responses to vocationalism (Pye, Haywood and Mac An Ghail, 1996 being a notable exception). There is simultaneously, then, a large literature on white, working class students in FE, but little which examines the interactions of race and class, namely how whiteness(es) are implicated in class formation. During the conduct of my ethnographic research, the limitations of theories and research activities which deal with class in isolation, or race without acknowledging that ‘whiteness’ is a racial category become apparent.

The response to this paradox should not be that there is a need for more studies on whiteness in FE. This runs the risk of further fetishising whiteness as the essential object of research. However, there is a need to recognise the interactions of class and whiteness and the ways in which racialisation is employed as an activity within educational institutions (Nayak, 1997). This explains not only how discrimination against ethnic minority students results from the active employment of racist strategies by schools (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) but also might explain differentiation between different social classes of white (and ethnic minority) students. Indeed, in most recent research on vocational students in FE the emphasis on race, class and gender jointly on the process of transition to HE - usually at ages 18-19, or the labour market is more explicit (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 1998, 2000; Ball, 2003a; Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003; Preston, 2001).

The aim of this chapter is to examine the interactions between whiteness and class for students in an Essex SFC and its impact on subsequent progression to HE. Rather than examine the white working class or middle class as separate cultural enclaves, I emphasise the ways in which whiteness is deployed (Nayak, 1997, 1999) as an instrument of class or 'class strategy' (Ball, 2003a). My starting point is that whiteness can be best understood as not only a past, but also a continuing, process of racialisation; specifically that it can be related to historical and material developments, particularly in relation to the development of capitalism, social class and the welfare state. I argue that in understanding how this process operates in particular sites, such as an FE or SF college, we gain an understanding of the contingent nature of processes of class and

racial formation and how they relate to locality. In detailing the ethnographic findings I show how vocational students are associated with a 'backward' form of whiteness by the college as opposed to the 'respectable' form of whiteness associated with middle class students. In my conclusion I detail the consequences of this research for practice in the areas of access and widening participation in HE, relating the findings back to data from the previous two chapters.

### 6.3. WHITENESS AS SOCIAL FORMATION

'I'm tired of being white trash, broke and always poor'

('I'm Tired', Eminem, 1998)

'Americans love to hate the poor... The term white trash helps solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority'

(Newitz and Wray, 1997: 2)

There is no doubt that, despite Eminem's protests regarding his previous poor employment, 'whiteness' brings with it economic privilege in the labour market – he is now the highest earning rap artist in a predominantly black genre. However, this does not mean that we should assume that whiteness has any agency of its own. The advantages associated with white ethnicity were gained through past and continuing economic subordination of other ethnic groups (Cox, 1971). In addition, 'whiteness' itself is a contested, socially constructed and heterogeneous identity as is the case with other ethnic classifications (Frankenberg, 1993). Despite the 'neutrality' attached to

white ethnicity in much educational research, whiteness is not an essentialist category – like other ethnicities it arises ‘...as a result of socially and historically contingent processes of racialisation constituted through and embodied in a wide variety of discourses and practices rather than as a biologically determined product of genes and DNA’ (Newitz and Wray, 1997: 3). In moving away from essentialist and fetishistic conceptions of whiteness, we may gain a clearer understanding of the symbolic formation of white identity and the role of this identity in manifestations of economic power (Fine, Powell, Weis and Wong, 1997).

In examining how any racial formation has developed in relation to social class, the Neo-Marxist concept of racialisation as a *process* provides purchase on the modalities of class, race *and* gender. It is not that racial categorisation arises purely as a function of capitalist development. Rather it arises through the ‘...complex interplay of different modes of production and, in particular, of the social relations necessarily established in the course of material production’ (Miles, 1987: 7, quoted in Cole, 2003) as well as through contestation between social classes. For example, the acquisition of ‘whiteness’ by Irish immigrants into United States (US) labour markets is a salient case of the way in which white identity is socially constructed through the labour process, heterogeneous, and contested by native US workers (Ignatieff, 1995). Roediger (1991, 2002) also sees the acquisition of white identity as contested. This resulted partly through the ‘divide and rule’ strategies employed by capitalists in increasing profits by pitting racially divided work teams against each other in the early stages of US capitalism (Roediger, 1991: 176-181, 2002: 151). Additionally, racial divisions are employed as a strategy of maintaining



real wage differentials (and non-pecuniary, psychological, distinctions) between native white workers and immigrants.

Although this US work, largely by labour historians, does indicate the contested nature of whiteness and its important link with social class we should not assume that the process of white racialisation is on any kind of ultimate historical trajectory but rather consider it to be a dynamic (but not arbitrary) process. Hence, we might see whiteness develop as a fragmented, contested and increasingly *classed* identity. Again, in the US context, a collection of writings (Wray and Newitz, 1997) articulate the many ways in which whiteness is increasingly becoming a classed identity and shorthand for describing the differences between the white working class (and particularly what might be called the 'underclass') and other social classes. Using the term from popular culture 'white trash' they discuss the ways in which the supposed consumption patterns, sexuality and ability of the white working class are utilised by the media, government and corporations to devalue their cultural and labour market power.

There are limits to how far the processes articulated by Roediger (1991, 2002) and Ignatieff (1995) and terms such as 'white trash' (Wray and Newitz, 1997) or 'whiteness as trailer park' (Squire, 1997) can be transferred to the UK context. Indeed, earlier work which I have conducted on the topic (Preston, 2003b) has been criticised for using the term. Early US labour market history is dominated by the legacy of slavery and the processes by which capitalism (and education systems) were established in the US are very different to those in the UK (Green, 1990). Moreover, the term 'white trash' relates

to a specific US context and is used in a particular sense in US popular culture, although the term is gaining increasing currency in the UK. Despite these reservations, I would argue that there are some parallels between current articulations of whiteness and class in both countries.

With regard to the historical development of whiteness and social class in the UK, Bonnett (2000) shows how Victorian notions of 'respectable whiteness' excluded the working class from being accepted as 'white' in the same manner as the upper and middle classes (see also Marriott, 1999 for further elaboration). The argument is illustrated through Victorian ethnographies of journeying into working class communities in which the areas are described as 'dark' and 'alien'.

'... (There exists) a dark continent that is within walking distance of the General Post Office...the wild races who inhabit it will, I trust, gain public sympathy as easily as other savage tribes'

(Sims, 1976, first published in 1883. Quoted in Bonnett, 2000: 33)

From the Sunday Review of 1864:-

'The Bethnal Green poor...are a caste apart, a race of whom we know nothing, whose lives are of quite different complexion from ours...distinctions and separations, like those of the English classes which always endure, which last from the cradle to the grave...offer a very fair parallel to the separation of the slaves from the whites'

(Malik, 1996: 93, quoted in Bonnett 2000: 34)

Of course, the language used by these ethnographers was indicative of the forms of racism of the time, and one may argue that this choice of metaphor was inevitable in conveying difference. However, these quotes illustrate the use of race as prime depiction of class rather than other, material, descriptors.

According to Bonnett (2000), the conferring of 'whiteness' on the English working class resulted from both imperialism in the late nineteenth century and welfarism in the late twentieth century. Imperialism constructed a discourse of the English against 'other' nations and a sense of social solidarity around a concept of white 'Englishness', although Bonnett ignores popular resistance to imperial expansion from within England itself. The re-configuration of the welfare state since the breakdown of the Keynesian consensus of the 1970s leads Bonnett to speculatively suggest that hegemonic conceptions of whiteness may show a '...potential for movement' (Bonnett, 2000: 44) to a Victorian conception of the working class as 'differently white'. As examples of this he cites media accounts of white working class areas such as 'darkest Blackburn' (Bonnett, 2000: 44). Such accounts not only equate 'darkness' with crime in a racist manner, but also seek to distance working class whiteness from 'respectable whiteness'.

In drawing a link between crisis in capitalism (the decline of the welfare state) and changing representations of race, there are parallels between the work of Bonnett and earlier writers on race from the relative autonomy school (Hall, 1978; Centre for

Contemporary Cultural Studies - CCCS, 1982). For Bonnett and the relative autonomy school the (Gramscian) notion of hegemony as ruling class ideology is particularly important. Hence both racialisation and racism are seen as manifestations of ruling class ideology rather than as arising through conflict between competing working class racial groups for wages, or other benefits. Crisis in capital are hence also crisis in hegemony. For example, the response to the crisis in the 1970s was for the New Right to attempt to construct a new sense of nationhood and white, racial identity. For Hall (1978) and the CCCS (1982) this was manifested in terms of a moral panic concerning black street crime (particularly mugging). For Bonnett, additionally this has manifested itself in the problematisation of part of the white, working class.

The work of the relative autonomy school does help us to consider the relations between capitalism, class and race, but there is perhaps too much emphasis on the role of hegemony and its contestation rather than the ways in which race is 'deployed and understood' at various levels in society (Rowe, 1998: 30). In constructing the relation between whiteness and class, it is perhaps more helpful to consider various racialisations (and racisms: Cole, 2003) of whiteness as heterogeneous and contested, rather than over-determined and absolute. As shown in Chapter 2, structuralist approaches to education (including structuralist Marxist approaches) are often insensitive to local conditions. However, this does not mean abandoning attempts to understand race and class as materially and historically determined.

Although racialisation appears to be a macro phenomena, there is some relevance in studying particular local manifestations of the formation of race and class – of particular racialisations (Rowe, 1998: 48). These enable us both to examine the contingent nature of these processes and to examine the ways in which they relate to other phenomena such as nation, region and locality. The focus of this research in Essex meant that there were particular assumptions of the nature of whiteness in the area. The stereotypes ‘Essex Man’ and ‘Essex Girl’ are loaded with particular assumptions concerning the nature of consumption, politics and class (Hayes and Hudson, 2001). These have not only become shorthand in the media for referring to a particular type of dis-respectable whiteness but also are used in a reflexive manner by Essex people.

It may also be argued that there is something significantly different about the way in which certain types of whiteness are pathologised in the current welfare regime under ‘New Labour’. Bonnett’s general suggestion concerning the re-specification of whiteness in a post-welfarist, and increasingly neo-imperialist state are arguably different in ‘Third Way’ policy than ‘New Right’ policy contexts. Whilst the latter attempted to build consensus around neo-liberalism and strong national identity, the former similarly extends neo-liberal market forms whilst emphasising the concept of community within an equally strong, but pluralist, sense of nation.

In this policy context, social capital has become central to ‘Third Way’ discourses on community development (Gamarnikow and Green, 1999). Although social capital is itself a contested concept, there is an emphasis on the building of networks, associations

and trust between individuals (Putnam, 1995: 66) as a basis for community development, although theorists have claimed that social capital can lead to faster rates of economic growth, increased government efficacy, improved health and reduced crime (Putnam, 2000). Perhaps in an attempt to mollify some of the extravagant claims made for social capital which at its most crass aims to reduce social theory to a singularity (Fine and Green, 2000), theorists refer to its 'dark side' (Putnam, 2000: 350-367). The dark side of social capital comprises the tendency for individuals to form exclusive associations, or use social capital for malign purposes. Interestingly, rather than business cartels, the Freemasons or middle class housing associations which discriminate against black residents (hooks, 2000), the examples often chosen are the actions of right wing extremist white, working class groups (Putnam, 2000: 21-22) or black street gangs (Putnam, 2000: 312-313). The implicit assumption is that the 'dark side' of social capital lies in poor-whites or blacks 'gone bad' rather than in the hierarchical associations or groupings of the white middle or upper classes. Hence it is pathological cases, rather than systemic inequities which are responsible for the 'dark side' of social capital. This pathologising of community is central to current policy discourses on crime, community and education.

In terms of crime and disorder, the UK, the recent Home Office (Cantle) report (Home Office, 2002) into the riots which occurred in various Northern towns makes explicit reference to the importance of social capital in community cohesion (Home Office, 2002: 13). Whilst the report refers to the role of economic disadvantage in fuelling conflict, the types of social capital existing in both white and Asian ethnic communities are problematised in the report rather than institutionalised inequalities. In particular, both

white and ethnic minority communities are accused of possessing too much ‘bonding’ rather than ‘bridging’ social capital. Therefore the problem of racial tension is located in the actions of the individuals in the community rather than in institutions or social structures.

Moreover, this discourse of pathologising white (and ethnic minority) working class communities is also apparent in recent policy on education, as discussed in the first chapter. As seen in Chapter 1, in the DfES white paper on HE *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a) aspirations are cited as the key reason behind lack of participation for this group of ‘non-traditional’ students. The causes of educational progression are not only individuated but localised in families and communities.

In current policy debate then, something is ‘wrong’ with the white working class which makes them educationally different from the white middle class (Gewirtz, 2001). The tension is not just one of class, but one of ‘whiteness’ – there is a distinction between a respectable, cosmopolitan, middle class whiteness and a retrogressive, static, working class whiteness (Skeggs, 2002b), one which is insular, disordered and with low economic and educational aspirations. I have argued that this manifestation can be best understood in terms of the historical process of racialisation of the white working class, and other racial groups. This process of racialisation, and its practices, informs this ethnographic study on the progression of white, working class students through a college and to HE.

#### 6.4. COMMUNITY PROFILING AND THE 'POSITIONING' OF THE WHITE, WORKING CLASS AT THAMESIDE

As seen in previous chapters, the ways in which colleges use G-score, reifying it into a statement of potential, rather than of class and prior discrimination, is critical in examining student progression from FE to HE. This is particularly the case in an institutional framework where progression to a 'good' university is increasingly important (Power, 2000; Ball, 2003). The key conceptual framework utilised in the thesis has been the utility of Becker's concept of human capital and Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, and capitals more generally (Bourdieu, 2003). Both are seen to be of some use in analysing progression to HE, but in particular Bourdieu's framework has the conceptual strength of relating micro-social processes to structural phenomena such as class as seen in Chapter 5. According to Bourdieu, the role of the educational institution is in legitimising the exchange of arbitrary forms of cultural distinction (cultural capital) for educational qualifications (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). However, this process is probabilistic rather than totalising. The uses and strategies which individuals make in the deployment of their various capitals is important and has been emphasised in contemporary works on FE and progression (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1999; Skeggs, 1997; Ball, 2003a). As I have shown in Chapter 5, working class students and their families may also use strategies of emotional and social capital in making the transition to HE. Additionally, although Bourdieu has little to say concerning race, rather than class, strategies as a rationale for distinction there has been recent interest in the ways in which whiteness is deployed in education (Nayak, 1997) and the community (Nayak, 1999) as an *active and continuous* strategy of individuals in creating racial distinction.



This ethnographic study therefore contextualises Bourdieu's work in terms of both class and racial distinction. Additionally, it is also helpful to understand the institutional framework within which such activities take place which is much neglected in his work on education (Ball, 2003a: 8). Indeed, there were various pressures on Thameside which served to maintain distinctions of class and race through course rationing as shown in the previous chapter.

Firstly, like many other colleges, Thameside utilised a technique known as community profiling (Barwuah and McCallum, 1999) in determining the curriculum offered to students. Community profiling is imported directly from commercial market research whereby businesses base the products and services sold in an area on the socio-demographic characteristics of its residents. This technique is expanding within FE and becoming increasingly contracted out to private consultancies as part of 'geo-demographics' (Farr, 2003; Webster and Tebbutt, 2003). As Thameside was located in a predominantly white working class area, senior managers had used community profiling information to shift the curriculum offered towards vocational provision. This was justified informally as being more suitable for 'our type of students'. However, there were also new local housing developments which had brought an influx of more middle class students into the area who were targeted with an academic course offering. Both formally and informally, the spatial characteristics of the community were both raced (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 1998) and classed. In this context, choice of qualification would be a misnomer, rather academic qualifications were 'rationed' (Gillborn and

Youdell, 2000) and students with fewer than five GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) passes at C or above at age 16 were not able to access the academic route. Therefore, a classed distinction was made between those students capable of taking academic and those capable of taking vocational qualifications. As I will argue, this was also a racialised distinction.

Secondly, the class position of lecturers in the college was both tenuous and required strategies of maintenance. A significant number of lecturers would not live, or visit for purposes other than work, the area in which Thameside was based citing lack of culture, or even crime, as reasons. Many lecturers considered themselves to be middle class, which constantly conflicted with the proletarianisation of their jobs as conditions in FE worsened. Indeed, for some the shift in curriculum offering to increased vocationalisation was a cause for resentment as being a further downgrading of their employment. However, this was not a sentiment shared by all lecturers and for many months of the ethnographic study the college was embroiled in an industrial dispute part of the purpose of which was to protect contact time for vocational students. In terms of citing myself within this process, I was a lecturer in Economics and Business Studies with an upbringing in a predominantly white, working class community. As discussed in Chapter 4, I was increasingly cynical concerning the role of FE colleges in facilitating the progression of working class students to HE. My own class position was therefore more of a boundary issue than for some of the other lecturers at the college who classed themselves as definitively middle class.

In total, the role of both college marketing strategies and the class position of lecturers can be seen as part of the institutional context which frame the everyday practices of maintaining racial and class distinction within Thameside. I will show how from induction, lecturer 'talk' about students and through the working practices of GNVQ such distinctions were worked and maintained.

### 6.5. EVERYDAY CONSTRUCTIONS OF CLASS AND WHITENESS AT THAMESIDE

From arrival, GNVQ students were frequently depicted by lecturers and managers in terms of their *consumption patterns*. Like the white working class of the American South, white vocational students at Thameside were often positioned as '...vulgar, hot, sensual, overeating, overweight, lazy, poor, backwards. We can assume that the message from the dominant powers is: those who have little consume much – indeed, much more than they deserve!' (Sweeney, 1997 255).

As examples of what Bourdieu (1973) might call *divulcation* I will examine the ways in which GNVQ students use of their mobile phones and their consumption of fast food was regulated by lecturers and the college. There are a number of other examples of the stereotyping of student cultural resources such as their clothing, their interest in cars and leisure activities, but the examples chosen serve to illustrate divulcation and the interaction between divulcation and the naming of students' cultural capital as being 'white, but differently so'.

The use of mobile 'phones was perceived to be a problem in all classes, but it was particularly perceived to be a problem in GNVQ. Early on in the term, lecturers were quick to associate the vulgar use of mobile 'phones with GNVQ students:-

'If they're called Ryan or Glen, or if they wear a cap, then they must be doing GNVQ. I'm sick of hearing their mobile 'phones going off in the corridor.'

(Graham, GNVQ Teacher)

There were a number of incidents in GNVQ and A level classes when student mobile 'phones would emit ringtones, but the reactions of lecturers in GNVQ and A level classes differed. In A level classes, there was often shared humour between the lecturer and the class regarding the ringing of the mobile, although the 'phone was also an area of irritation for some lecturers. However, in GNVQ classes, the use of mobile 'phones was problematised as a particular area for control and regulation. Notices were placed in GNVQ classes forbidding the use of mobile 'phones. In addition, there was a system in place for the confiscation of the mobile 'phones of GNVQ students whereby students would have their 'phones taken from them until collection at the end of the day. For students, the subversive use of mobile 'phones in class by text messaging or the explicit use of them in order to test the boundaries of behaviour or to indicate resistance became more common.

This may seem a trivial issue on which to discuss the valuation of student cultural capital and it could be argued that student mobiles tended to ring more, or were of greater

intensity in GNVQ lessons. However, the salient point is the institutional response to student consumption. The use of mobile 'phones became associated with GNVQ students, and regimes of control and regulation were imposed upon GNVQ classes to forbid their use. In A level classes, the use of mobile 'phones was not forbidden, but rather negotiated between teacher and student, although this still obviously involved (less formal) mechanisms of control. Perceptions that the use of mobile 'phones by GNVQ students was both 'vulgar' and in need of 'control' served to position their cultural resources differently to A level students. This served the marketing strategy of Thameside as being a site for 'adult' academic study whilst imposing controls on the 'unruly' vocational students.

Divulgence also intersected with perceptions of students' appearances in terms of their consumption of fast food. Many of the students possessed part-time jobs in fast-food outlets, although it was more common for GNVQ than A level students to hold these positions. This was partly connected with the necessity of part time work for these students, given their relatively poorer familial resources and the manner in which even the allocation of part time jobs were allocated according to class position. For middle class students, the option of not working, working for a friend of the family or for a 'prestigious' retailer such as The Gap were potential routes away from the low pay, poor conditions, fast food sector. However, for working class students there were a large number of positions open at these outlets providing a steady source of potential income. As well as (accurate) perceptions that students filled these labour market positions, there

was an assumption that students were avid consumers of fast food. For example, in an assessment of GNVQ student coursework, two students were discussed as follows:-

Alice (GNVQ Lecturer): Those students...(GNVQ)...are like animals, they flop about like walruses eating McDonalds.

Sandra (Middle manager): They'd probably be proud to be compared to walruses.

This exchange illustrates not only divulgence, but also the way in which the hexis (cultural capital held in the body, Bourdieu, 1977: 93-94) of some students was perceived by lecturers. The identification of obesity with over-consumption was based in a belief that their bodies were in some ways out of control, pathological and in need of regulation – '....the working class body is always read as excessive' (Sweeney, 1997: 255). As with the case of mobile 'phones, GNVQ students were particularly identified as eating fast, junk, food which was banned from GNVQ, but not A level, classrooms.

Subtle interactions between gender, ethnicity and class were also apparent. Girls studying GNVQ were classified by many teachers and managers as being preoccupied with their appearance and relationships and were over-sexualised. For example, when comparing an Asian A level with another Asian GNVQ student (who was subsequently to leave college), the reason for the vocational student's lack of ambition was blamed on her failure to meet the expected behaviour of the academic, Asian girl:-

‘She’s got no chance of going to university, she seems to spend most of her time doing her fingernails. She wasn’t even in college today – probably with her boyfriend or doing her hair.’

(Chris, GNVQ Lecturer)

For A level students, these types of ascriptions were uncommon. A level courses were the normative, comparison category by which other courses and students were judged. Conversely, cultural capital of GNVQ students, defined in terms of their appearance and bodily characteristics and through disgust at their ‘vulgar’ patterns of consumption or *divulgence* (Bourdieu, 1973) was not legitimised. Behaviour was pathologised as out of control, over-consuming and over-sexualised with resulting responses of control and regulation. Equally, the value of the GNVQ certificate for either labour market or HE progression was not established within the college.

## 6.6. ROADS TO NOWHERE: GNVQ AND PROGRESSION TO HE

The notion that GNVQ courses were an adequate preparation for the labour market or HE was stressed to vocational students, both in college marketing materials and through their courses. In particular, the homologies between the nature of the GNVQ course and the labour market were constantly stressed through visits to local employers, partnerships with local firms and use of business materials in the course assignments.

At one level of interpretation, the correspondences between the activities which students undertook on their GNVQ course and the low pay, low skill jobs of the service sector

were clear. A large retail shopping centre in Essex provided an occupational destination for many of the vocational students at Thameside with associated poor wages, conditions and lack of autonomy. For example, the GNVQ student induction involved a process of orientation, touring the college in groups to find out the names of senior people within the college, constructing an organisation chart of the college management, locating the fire exits and answering questions regarding college rules and procedures. This process had obvious parallels with the procedures that many students undertook as part of their part-time jobs where workers are given an orientation exercise to perform focusing on the responsibilities of the worker. In addition, the emphasis on self-monitoring (through completing action plans and self-evaluations), team work (also identified by Meagher, N., 1997 and an important feature of work in the service sector – see Klein, 2000; Schlosser, 2002) in completing assignments and even the trading of assignments was evident. One could even enlist the evidence that lecturers were concerned with students' appearance and consumption cited above as pointing towards a wider conception of labour as embodied, *aesthetic labour*. Indeed, the importance of individual appearance in service sector employment has been noted on in current organisation research (Witz, Warhurst and Nickson, 2003). There are obvious parallels between this and the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) who identify school routines that encourage punctuality and conformity in the formation of the working class in the 1970s, as discussed in Chapter 2.

On the other hand, it is difficult to see how business would have such as pernicious influence on the GNVQ course especially given the autonomy of the educational sphere (Whitty, 1985) and teachers and lecturers (Dale, 1989) although FE colleges have been



subject to a number of government directives and requirements in recent years. In essence, though, the college seemed to be serving largely its own needs in that the ultimate goal of the GNVQ course from the perspective of management seemed to be the declaration of funding units to the FEFC (the body which was responsible for providing FE colleges with funding allocations). There were many incidences of management putting pressure on lecturers to pass students at any cost and of artificially inflating grades. One lecturer remarked that:-

‘It doesn’t really matter whether GNVQ students turn up or not...they pass anyway. The problems with my GNVQ group are not taken seriously by management. I am basically told to pass students who copy work, it doesn’t matter as long as they have two complete folders at the end of the course.’

(Paul, GNVQ teacher in interview)

As Thameside’s Principal said on addressing staff as to the purposes of the college (with feeling) ‘The college would be so much better without all of these students’.

Whether colleges were producing skills, attitudes, funding units or ‘labour power’ in the abstract (Rikowski, 2002) there was evidence that the positioning of GNVQ as neither academic, nor fully vocational qualification of uncertain value had repercussions for further participation in education. There was a general cooling off of expectations (Banks, 1992) amongst GNVQ students regarding progression to university in favour of

other routes. In a poignant example of this, one of the GNVQ students (Phillip) indicates the futility of paying for more of the same vocational education:-

‘University wouldn’t make much difference to me: I’m not going to be a brain surgeon or anything! It wouldn’t make much difference to my earnings after I left. It was mainly having to work part time, the long hours, I would like to do a full time job, come home and be finished. My parents didn’t really push me to go or not. My dad used to work for a bank and I’d really like to be an estate agent. In an office job, you sit around all day, but as an estate agent you get to visit houses and flats.’

A similar perspective on employment was offered by Monica:-

‘College is too much! Too much education, too much work, too much learning. I just want to go to work now. Get a job in London as a legal secretary or something to do with marketing, or the Bank of England. A lot of my friends work and they always have money - I’m quite poor!’

and at least one student realised the futility of the relationship between attaining a qualification and their future prospects:-

‘Can you believe it, I’m the only person who got a decent job and I did the least work! Whopper sits at home playing on his Playstation, Sue is at Gala Bingo, Leigh is still at

IKEA. They were mugs doing all that work when you could just copy the assignments from the book.'

(Tony, GNVQ student after leaving the course with a Merit)

### 6.7. RESISTANCE AND COUNTER-ACCOMODATION

Of course, working class students were not passive victims of these processes. They were able to make use of certain cultural aspects of their position to subvert some aspects of their courses. In particular, students would take pleasure in sensuous acts of consumption in lessons such as eating fast-food, texting and talking on mobile 'phones and use the time afforded them within the FOFO (Fuck Off and Find Out as the lecturers called it) non-structure of their courses to work in part-time jobs or in entertaining themselves around the college and town. Sweeney (1997: 254) refers to Bakhtin's metaphor of the 'carnavalesque' in subverting dominant hegemonies through 'vulgar pleasures': 'Carnival is the place of laughter, bad taste, loud and irreverent music, parody, free speech, bodily functions, eating and feasting, a place where excess is glorified. Carnival is a world not without rank, but one where rank is allowed to be reversed, showing the potential of a society without hierarchy' (Sweeney, 1997: 254). Indeed, students took pleasure in language, humour, play and what the male students referred to as 'larging it'. By playing with, parodying and inflating their ascribed identity, the students may have achieved a partial demystification of the irrelevance of the qualification to their working lives (Willis, 1977; 2000). They were using the nature of 'Essex-ness' with all of its negative (and positive) connotations in a reflexive manner. Indeed, there is considerable strength in this identity and in 're-capturing' certain

working class, white, identities for cultural work (Wray and Newitz, 1997) including social justice of which educational participation is undoubtedly a part (Ball, 2003 ; Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003).

These acts in themselves can not necessarily be considered to be *successful* forms of resistance. Although they may have represented deeper signs of class resentment, or even class conflict (Skeggs, 2002b), the institutional (rather than cultural) perspective of this ethnography did not enable me to investigate these ideas. These behaviours, and other forms of subversion, were as common in the academic track – it was their enhanced visibility through surveillance of vocational students which problematised them. Indeed, many students complied with the demands of GNVQ. Moreover, following Lynch's (1988) concept of counter-resistance, the college and related agencies were able to *counter-accommodate* many varied forms of student resistance. Due to the dislocation between student effort, qualification and subsequent labour market status within GNVQ (Preston, 2001) the college was able to accommodate, and put pressure on its staff to accommodate various forms of student resistance: - '...deflating and reconstructing resistances into 'acceptable' (recycled) educational products' (Lynch, 1988: 153). As a corporation (albeit a public sector one) the college was essentially interested in the production of paper returns to the funding council in order to maximise revenue. Subsequently, student retention and the awarding of certificates were always placed above behavioural concerns despite the effort placed on the surveillance and control of the latter. For the management of Thameside, the irresistible desire to maintain funding took priority over local student resistances.

Given the partiality of student resistances of this type, there was some opportunity in this ethnography to observe how student and lecturer / worker resistances may operate together. One area in which resistance from the wider, rather than occupationally defined, working class arose was during an industrial dispute at Thameside over contact hours. Although this may be considered to be a narrow, factional issue, student as well as staff interests motivated the anticipated and actual strike action undertaken by the lecturers. In particular, vocational students would have suffered from a reduction in contact time as these courses are both of lower symbolic value within the college and accorded the college with greater flexibility in terms of allocated contact time. College lecturers therefore had a contradictory position in reluctantly regulating vocational students and ultimately controlling the labour power which fuels these processes. During this action, an anonymously distributed student newsletter 'Increase in Contact Hours?' offered a glimmer of the possibilities for joint student and staff action in the FE sector:-

#### **'FACT**

There are only 5 members of SMT (Senior Management Team) but over 100 staff and 1400 students – who really has the power if they are willing to use it?'

Although the power relations, rather than the raw numbers of individuals means that there is inevitably an asymmetry in such actions, the result of the strike action was a success and vocational students did not receive a reduction in contact hours or provision. Although not a focal part of the study, this reveals that although FE colleges are sites

where education is rationed and discrimination valorised, this does not inevitably mean that these relations can not be contested with implications for progression to HE.

## 6.8. CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have shown how white-racialisation as fundamentally a classed process occurs within the everyday practices of an FE college through its marketing strategies and in everyday interactions between lecturers and students. I have shown that the exercise of whiteness is an active process within a local site, as well as relating this to historical circumstance. Whiteness as classed practice critically does not benefit all white students equally. Interestingly, such comments on students fall out of the recognised bounds of racism or sexism as they mainly deal with class ascriptions. This partly explains the maintenance of these forms of discrimination. The role of 'capitals' in this process is not necessarily as useful as observing FE colleges as a field in which social relations are played out, but crucially may also be contested.

This chapter suggests that to contextualise the ways in which capitals are used, exchanged and valued we need to return to examine some of the material factors and historical processes underlying both class and racialisation. Even within post-modernist and post-structuralist writing on this subject there is concern that in discourses concerning new-ethnicities or sub-cultural resistance without reference to social class (the dangers of which are made explicit by Hall, 1992) much has been lost. Particularly there has been a lack of engagement with these process in texts which '...downplay or erase such issues as that of state power, social class divisions, institutional structures or

hegemonic cultural capital' (Brah, Hickman and Mac an Ghail, 1999: 3). For those who are saddled with an 'old' and increasingly pathologised as anti-cosmopolitan ethnicity such as white or black working class (Skeggs, 2002a) there are few alternative discourses or real opportunities open to them (Cohen, 1999). Whilst new stories about what it means to be white, working class and from Essex may empower some educational trajectories (and potentially disadvantage those of ethnic minorities as well as other working class whites) a re-engagement with class (Gewirtz, 2001), and race, as materially and historically based is also necessary. This 'widens' the 'widening participation' debate away from the individual and local towards a more conflictual and historical account of the reasons for low participation in HE. As Chapters 4 and 5 have shown, student access to courses which facilitate access to HE are rationed. This chapter has built on that analysis by indicating how the treatment of students on low status vocational courses may also contribute towards lack of progression.

## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION – WIDENING OR NARROWING?**

### **7.1. INTRODUCTION**

In this thesis I have examined the utility of models of ‘human capital’ and cultural and other capitals as articulated in the ‘new class paradigm’ (Savage, 2003) in examining progression from FE to HE. In doing so I have also examined the deficiencies of a policy based on aspirations and attainment in widening participation and argued that the actions of FE colleges are crucially important in this debate. In concluding, I will examine the implications of this research for theory, methodology and policy mapping out the main points in this introduction before turning to more substantive conclusions.

Turning first to theory, as I have shown, although economic and cultural background are important factors for students they are by no means overwhelming. Students do take into account economic considerations in terms of earning and debt but these operate rather indirectly on subsequent student decisions. Intentions, rather than applications to HE, seem to be influenced by economic considerations. Similarly, in terms of what can broadly considered to be cultural factors, it would be churlish to deny that students’ backgrounds and their stocks of cultural capital (attitudes, dispositions), social capital (networks and contacts – ‘hot knowledge’ Ball, 2003a: 100), economic capital and emotional capital (support) differed by social class. There was a ‘naturalness’, a script (Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003) for middle class students, concerning their



progression to HE. However, this blanket statement conceals much concerning the heterogeneity of both working and middle class student strategies and capitals. As I have shown in Chapter 5, working class students made use of (albeit different) social capital from friends and emotional capital from families in negotiating transition to HE. In particular, working class students from some ethnic minority backgrounds had strong family support and intentions in terms of HE. It is also interesting that although debt incurred through HE was perceived by some working class students to have particularly adverse consequences in terms of progression to HE, this was not true of all, and quantitative evidence shows that in general working class students expect less debt and more earnings (a higher rate of return) from HE, or at least one which was not substantially different from middle class students. It must also be remembered that for some middle class students the 'unsaid' script and naturalness of applying to HE was not helpful as a basis for their transition to HE. The ease of such previous transitions for middle class parents was not necessarily true of their children.

Economic and cultural factors at the level of individual 'capitals' do explain something. However, what resonated through both the quantitative and qualitative research was how far the operation of institutions by rationing access to courses (both A level and GNVQ) through GCSE scores and subsequently by qualification type in FE exacerbated already unequal patterns of choice in HE. The conflation of G score with other social and personality attributes led to it gaining importance as a social category as well as a marker of ability (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). In the ethnographic research, this can be clearly seen by the social categorisation of students on the GNVQ course. As G score is so

highly correlated with class and ethnicity this can be seen as a form of secondary selection. Inevitably, though, some middle class students also comprise part of the low GCSE score group. Hence reproduction operates in a jagged, uneven form (Ball, 2003a) but I would add that in examining reproduction a consideration of the macro, as well as the micro social is important. In particular, in Chapter 6 I have shown that we need to understand policy in its historical context to analyse progression to HE for particular groups of students.

That considerations of individual capital must be contextualised by institutional factors means that the way in which we pursue research in this area may need to be rethought. For economists of education, this may mean getting their hands dirty in examining the practices of institutions and the macro-economic and macro-social conditions in which institutions develop. This may require an engagement not only with congruent disciplines (namely sociology, but particularly political economy) but also with alternative methodology. Uncovering what might be called ‘material breaches’ of practices of rational choice means that there is potential for economists to use methods such as interview or even (as here) ethnography. I feel that this is valuable, particularly given the hijacking of the discipline by groups of economists who ape the physical sciences (McCloskey, 1994).

In general, interdisciplinary study of this subject should be encouraged. In this thesis I have engaged with economics, political economy, sociology and cultural studies. This ‘Jack of all trades’ approach to research has its obvious corollary, but forging links

between areas of these disciplines may be extremely fertile. Most obviously, the situating of rational choice models within a cultural and social framework has been examined in this study. Additionally, the ways in which market processes (colleges maximising funding) relates to cultural and social reproduction ('white trash vocationalism') has been explained.

In drawing this chapter to a close, I turn to policy. This thesis supports the contention that GCSE score operates as a social category in rationing access to FE courses (and subsequently HE). This is similar to processes of rationing which have previously been identified for schools (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). As shown in Chapters 5 and 6, GCSE score is used by colleges in this sample in regulating entry to courses as has been identified in other studies (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; McDonald and Lucas, 2001). There is no evidence that increasing GCSE scores would not result in the restatement of a higher level barrier in FE for taking academic courses. Indeed, there is some case study evidence that SFC have already raised their GCSE entry requirements for such courses (McDonald and Lucas, 2001). There is also econometric evidence that general improvements in working class student exam performance has done little to reverse their access to higher levels of education over time when compared to other social classes (Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles, 2003). The empirical work and evidence discussed in this thesis suggests that improving GCSE performance alone will not necessarily increase HE participation.

As this thesis has shown, the empowerment agenda of policy (DfES, 2003a) in increasing, widening, deepening participation is seductive. The real practices within the institutions studied are to 'play the game' on paper in order to secure funding, but have the unintended consequence of effecting progression to HE. As shown through evidence in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 progression to HE for these FE students involves a range of factors, but allocation to course is an important consideration. This means that without institutional reform policy interventions at the level of the individual are necessarily limited. I will finish by addressing some broad lessons for general policy, and particularly some possible policy directions for FE colleges, HEIs and government suggested by this thesis.

## **7.2. THEORY**

### **7.2.1 Can 'capitals' explain the HE transition?**

First let me turn to matters of theory. In this thesis I have shown the complex and situated nature of student progression to HE. The difficulty of resolving the transition to HE in terms of one explanatory frame such as human capital or cultural capital has been shown in the preceding two chapters. Human, cultural and (now) additionally social capital can partially explain what individuals and their families do. As the title of this section suggests these are only a small part of what might be called a 'pyrotechnics' of capital in that other forms of capital such as emotional and naturally economic capital are often also considered. However, I would argue that there needs to be a re-evaluation of the role of both institutions and macro-social processes of class formation, re-formation and re-classification in examining progression to HE. To use the terminology employed

at the end of Chapter 2, explaining progression to HE requires a theory which is both eclectic (adopting theories from different paradigms) and contingent (understanding that whether factors operate or not depend in turn upon other influences).

First, human capital theory. As shown by the quantitative evidence, although the rate of return to education is a significant explanatory variable in explaining the intention to enter university, it was not significant in explaining subsequent application and enrollment. Tests of human capital theory in a weaker form in terms of whether debt would lead to application also showed that there was no association between these variables and the enrollment decision (Appendix 2). Moreover, students had a generally poor understanding of the costs and benefits of HE and were mainly uncertain as to whether monetary costs and benefits were influential in their decision making, at least through comments made in interviews. However, survey evidence showed that students were able to make predictions which (on average) were close to those of ex-post studies (although there was considerable variation around the mean). There is therefore mixed evidence for a human capital explanation for student behaviour in this study. Survey data produced reasonable estimates of expected returns (although this was not supported through interviews) and economic expectations were associated with intention but not application to HE. An 'immunising strategy' (Blaug, 1992) from human capital theorists would be that students revised their cost and benefit views between intention and enrollment, although again from qualitative research, it is doubtful that students were assessing the costs and benefits of HE in a scientific manner. In future research, it would

be prudent to track these changes in expectations through use of longitudinal surveys. In the current study, constraints of resource and time made this impractical.

This does not mean that human capital theory is irrelevant in the transition to university. The influence of the rate of return to education on intention was significant, and there was a relationship between intention and application, although intention did not lead automatically to enrollment. Human capital considerations were also evident in the readings which students undertook of the material artifacts related to their courses, such as prospectuses which stressed the monetary gains to be made from HE and in their social contacts with students who had attended HE. By readings, I am invoking possible links between human capital theory, and thereby the economics of education, and other areas of social research such as cultural studies. That is, the cost and benefit calculus to enter HE may be based on monetary estimations that are embedded in, and hence inseparable from, their social and cultural context. For example, as we saw from interviews with Steven and Robert (Chapter 5) the earnings expected from their vocational degree were not necessarily extractable in monetary terms, but interpretations of increased earnings from provider information carried an emotional resonance within their class and situational context. For Helen, too, the burden of debt which would have been placed on her mother should she have gone to university illustrates the emotional consequences of debt. There may then be a tentative case to be made for a human capital explanation which does not necessarily mean that individuals are fully able to extract costs and benefits from their social context, but that these embedded costs and benefits are important in making decisions. Hence individuals do not act as 'homo economicus' in

making decisions based on abstracted costs and benefits, but rather act as emotive readers of embedded economic information. Methodologies which attempt to cajole respondents into expressing costs and benefits in monetary terms are therefore not necessarily the best for investigating human capital theory. This oft-unexplored facet of human capital theory - what has been called a phenomenology of human capital theory (Killenn, Turton, Diamond, Dosnon and Wach, 1999) has implications for research in the economics of education, which I will discuss in the next section.

In terms of the students' class positions and cultural resources - what might be called their 'cultural or social capital' there was equally no straightforward narrative between these factors and progression to HE. In terms of quantitative evidence, there were no significant differences between *economic* expectations with regards to earnings and debt between the middle and working classes. However, there was possibly asymmetric access to information regarding earnings following university as evidenced in Chapter 6. Equally, as with the case of human capital theory, although class in terms of parental occupation did explain the intention to apply to university, there was no relationship between parental social class and the actual application to university. This may have been due to the social class categories chosen in the analysis where a dichotomous variable - working or middle class was used. A larger dataset may have made it possible to investigate finer divisions between class strata. Equally, the qualitative evidence pointed to the difficulty of inferring explanations solely based on concepts of 'habitus' given wide inter-class variation in responses - here we see class operating subtly (Chapter 5). However, a common response of middle class students was that HE was perceived to

be a 'natural' and assumed progression by their parents, lending some support for the theory of 'cognitive structures of choice' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2002) but how this information was transmitted to the students was less apparent. Economic and familial aspiration elements of class are obviously important in understanding the effect of class on progression to HE, but so too is a realisation that working class individuals and families can mobilise their albeit limited resources in creative ways to enable a transition to HE to be made. This may involve the mobilisation of emotional or familial resources or the formation of networks of working class students, all of who in this case intended to apply to the same university.

Aside from the habitus, cultural capital elements of class were important in securing progression to HE, particularly in terms of the symbolic exchange (or non-exchange) of the cultural resources of working class students. The dynamics and situation of cultural capital within a social context were particularly important here. In particular, I explained in Chapter 6 how the cultural capital of students was positioned by teachers and managers both in terms of its local (Essex) context and in terms of macro-social respecifications of the white working class within the modern nation state. Over time, through processes of streaming, induction, teacher labelling and pedagogy, students were positioned as 'white trash' as opposed to the 'respectable whiteness' of those on academic courses. This made careers in the service industry more possible than progression to HE for students whose academic potential and cultural resources were not emphasised by the college.



Social capital provides another capital framework for understanding progression to HE which, in its more critical formulation has recently been used by Ball (2003a). There was found to be qualitatively differential access to networks and peer groups with regard to HE although students who did not have similar levels of social capital to their peers were able to marshal informal networks of aid and assistance. This indicates that it may not be so much the quantity of social capital which is of importance, but the types of social capital which are recognised as having value in certain educational markets (Gewirtz, 2001).

What then, is the adequacy of various capital models in explaining access to HE? The answer is that alone each can only represent a partial understanding of patterns of HE access for these, and arguably other, students. This is due to the inadequacy of the *capital metaphor*, at least as employed in micro-economic and micro-sociological theory in explaining human behaviour.

As stated previously, the use of the term capital in these theories implies an asset which is held at some level of aggregation. In human capital theory, these assets are usually held by the individual as a property of mind, body or certificated assets such as credentials. In social capital theory, these are held at the level of the community. In cultural capital theories, cultural capital is the property of individuals, groups and social classes. However, within the 'new class paradigm' (Savage, 2003) there is a danger that a theoretical focus on the individual and the family will also become a methodological one.

The perceptions of students and their families are important, but so are the ways in which FE colleges shape progression to HE.

Thinking about capital as an asset, held at whatever level of aggregation, is both a powerful and a weak method of considering progression to HE. It is powerful in that it enables us to examine inequalities of HE progression in terms of the unequal resources and (resulting) practices which means that access to HE (or at least certain types of HE) will generally favour the interests of the better resourced through an interplay of capitals. Individual agency and structure can be seen as complementary aspects of this process. Individuals, families and classes may strategise with individual capitals (as much as their habitus allows them to) in order to achieve positional advantage over others. The nature of the exchange of capitals is a critical feature of current research (Savage, 2003) using Bourdieu's (1986) formulation of his theory of cultural, social and economic capital. It is worth noting, though, that aspects of behaviour such as friendships or information seeking were reduced to aspects of human capital in Becker's original theory. This notion, of exchange and the interplay of capitals, has been crucial to many contemporary theorists who aim to explain HE progression. In Ball (2003a) for example, the complementary roles of social and cultural capital in the acquisition of further human capital is stressed.

The weakness in such an approach is that, unless we are to make essentialist claims on capital, we must invoke some relations between these forms of capital and the locus in which capital is exchanged or used (markets in human capital theory, fields in cultural

capital). Capital has no 'value' of itself. In human capital terms, the investment which an individual makes in their education is largely of value only so much as it can be exchanged (as labour power) for market rewards although there is some scope for consideration of the non-pecuniary (use value) benefits of education. In cultural capital terms, the value of cultural capital is arbitrary exchanged only according to the rules dominant in that field of power (which are influenced by those with greater capital resources). This implies some form of power relation between individuals, some historical time in which these fields were established.

In good theorising on the relationships between 'forms of capital' and educational outcomes, power relations are made explicit. In particular, in writing on cultural and social capital the relations between states and markets are sometimes made (Ball, 2003a). Without referring to a higher level of aggregation, micro-economic and micro-social work on theories of capital, at least involving access to education is somewhat meaningless. This can be seen most obviously in contemporary work on social capital theory. For example, theorists who employ social capital in terms of a Bourdieuan / Weberian framework of social closure (Gamarnikow and Green, 1999; Ball, 2003a) invoke relations between the deployment of policies in the public sphere such as school choice or governance and the employment of social capital as a form of social closure. On the opposite side of the political spectrum, proselytizers and more cautious advocates of social capital (Schuller, 2001; Schuller, Baron and Field, 2000) advocate a more optimistic view of social capital by relating it to trends in the decline of civil society and of the historical role of the voluntary sector in the regeneration of civil society. As

Gamarnikow and Green (1999) point out, there are different political histories of social capital – what they don't say is that without reference to politics or history, social capital is an empty shell. It has no meaning without reference to other (higher) levels of abstraction.

In terms of future theorising on the roles of human, cultural (and social) capitals in theorising transition to HE, then, there are, then, two major points of note. The first is that artificial distinctions made between different forms of capital across academic disciplines are not necessarily helpful. There are more similarities between those who are using human capital and those who are using cultural or social capital frameworks than their proponents may want to believe. The contemporary concerns of human capital theorists in terms of access to information, networks and financial resources do not subsume concerns of cultural or social capital, but there are obviously parallels. Similarly, student concerns regarding debt or future earnings are frequently alluded to in ostensibly cultural capital accounts of student progression. However, there are parallels between these discussions and work in the economics of education on time preference (patience). To considerations of human, cultural and social capital we may add other forms of capital such as emotional or academic capital.

The second is that how we talk about capitals in this historical period is loaded with considerations beyond the micro-social. Rikowski (1999) refers to theories of human capital as 'Bourgeois theory' and, despite the emotive language, there is something to be said for this point. That individuals behave like tiny capitalists in making investment

decisions and building their own capital stocks both mystifies the process of capital formation and reifies the notion of capital. The mystification being that capital is something which is freely (excepting the opportunity cost of time) available to individuals. This is indeed a 'bourgeois' representation of capital similar to neo-classical representations of the entrepreneur who saves to accumulate financial and physical capitals. For Marxists, such as Rikowski capital is both a material force and a social relation. The reification being that what individuals are doing in their practices is work involving capital, rather than labour.

However, Rikowski (1999) also argues that human capital is actually more than 'Bourgeois theory' in that there is some truth that through education and training individuals become 'capitalised', that is useful to capital as productive labour. Human capital is capital within us, an alien force against our human nature as living labour. Therefore, Rikowski forges the links between what might be seen as abstract and macro-social – that is the nature of capitalism – and the individual and micro-social – that is the material nature of individuals lived experience as 'human capital'. Indeed, for Rikowski such distinctions between the micro and macro-social are not necessarily useful. In theorising in terms of capitals, then, we are forced to examine the nexuses through which such capitals are exchanged or acquire value as use. This may represent the 'field' in which capitals are exchanged, but has a wider meaning in terms of the social arrangements of any given society. It must be remembered that even in Bourdieu's complex and culturalist theory, economic capital (wealth) is the source from which other

forms of capital were derived. I will now turn to discuss how the exchange of capitals in this account needs to be contextualised in terms of institutional responses.

### **7.2.2 The FE College and class: a dynamic relationship**

In this thesis, two themes have consistently re-occurred as being important in explaining progression to HE.

The first is the role of the colleges as brokers of student futures. In both quantitative and qualitative terms the role of GCSE score becomes particularly important in the determination of student trajectories within college, and as to their own future in terms of progression to HE. The importance of this variable makes me wary of using the term 'market' in describing the behaviour of FE colleges. Colleges rationed educational provision internally and acted with a considerable degree of producer sovereignty in influencing student direction. Although they acted as capitals themselves in strategies of profit maximisation and reputation management this was within a market context far from conditions of perfect competition. Students had little market power in negotiating over the type of course on which they were placed.

The students' GCSE results, perhaps as an embodiment of previous disadvantage and educational rationing, played an important part in their subsequent applications to HE. As seen in Chapter 4, although the G score is not important in determining the intention to apply to university, it is more significant than parental social class or economic expectations in determining application. The importance of GCSE score operates in two dimensions. Firstly, the colleges use G score in strategies of profit maximisation. Using

supposed relationships between G score and performance at A level, the colleges decide upon a threshold level beyond which students should be allocated to the vocational, rather than the academic route. Strategies of persuasion and more overt pressure are used to allocate students the vocational route. From there on, G score became a social category, used to differentiate between academic and vocational student groups in terms of classed characteristics, as discussed in Chapter 6. Secondly, following a vocational track placed students in a different market for HE from their academic peers with mainly new universities being applied to by students with vocational qualifications alone. There was some evidence from the qualitative research in Chapters 6 and 7 that students were able to read the nature of their future education in these new universities as similar to that which they had already experienced. These comments were expressed both by students who were, and who were not going to new universities.

This use of the G score by colleges as an indication of the student's market worth and subsequent rationing of places on academic courses can be seen as a post-compulsory continuation of Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) rationing of GCSE qualifications within schools. In Gillborn and Youdell's study, the rationing of qualifications by ethnicity and class is indicative of institutional racism. It is difficult to support this conclusion given the attention given to white students in this study, however, I have referred to the manner in which tracking maintained distinction by social class by mobilising stereotypical characteristics of middle and working class whiteness. Ideally, more extensive ethnographic work in West Essex and Colne Colleges would have been conducted to examine whether ethnicity was mobilised in a similar manner to delineate between social

classes. This could also have identified differences, as well as similarities, between college policy.

In this thesis, then, I have seen an important role for the college as a site in the formation of class differences. Although one can not ignore differences between social classes in terms of their habitus and stocks of pre-existing capitals there are also areas of commonality between social classes and even areas where the aspirations of working class students seem to be counter-intuitive. For example, from descriptive statistics in Chapter 5, working class students seem to have *higher* economic expectations as to earnings, lower expectations as to debt and higher expectations of the rate of return to HE. Although these differences were not found to be statistically significantly greater than those of middle class students, they were certainly not significantly less.

Additionally, the educational aspirations of working class students and family support received were not homogeneous. Indeed, working class students were often able to mobilise both family support (emotional capital) and networks (social capital) in order to aid their progression to HE. Having said this, I would still agree with Ball (2003a) and other writers that for middle class students there was (generally) more access to resources and that the idea of making a transition to HE was accepted as being a 'natural' part of one's development. For middle class students, an exercise of choice would be not to go to university – progression to HE may be considered to be inertia, or non choice. I would disagree, though, as to the emphasis on the family and community as opposed to educational institutions as the more powerful influence on progression.



From the quantitative evidence, one may have rejected the notion that class is a centrally important variable in progression to HE. Class as defined occupationally was not found to be a predictor of application to HE (although it may have had a sleeper effect of being a predictor of the intention to enter HE.). However, class was a correlate of student pre-college qualifications (the G-score) and descriptively it had a powerful meaning in terms of the courses which students took in colleges which may have influenced their future progression to university.

I would contend that rather than an uncomplicated relationship between education and class, there has been a respecification of class in terms of its relation to education and a rearticulation of the manner in which the post-compulsory education system processes individuals from different class backgrounds. As seen in Chapter 6, class is often articulated through ethnicity; or rather class and ethnicity are articulated together. The whiteness of the working class students is used in repositioning them as waste or trash, of little value in terms of future learning potential, as shown in Chapter 6. Their vocational certificates and the manner in which grades are awarded are reasonably arbitrary with considerable institutional agency in determining the final grade. Techniques such as community profiling and geo-demography also encourage a localisation of class with courses designed for 'our type' of (working or middle class) student.

There is evidence that for some managers and lecturers within FE colleges students are commodity – but commoditised rather than commodified. That is, their value is ascertained in terms of their propensity to provide funding and reputational advantage

(for the college) rather than their value as wage-labourers (for capitalism). Working (or, less frequently middle) class students with low G-scores are both a risk and an opportunity to the market position of colleges. They provide funding, but their perceived risk of 'failure' means that they are allocated to vocational courses. Student social class therefore might become a potential deficit which is to be 'managed' by the college, with little thought as to the effect of this for further educational progression. As discussed in Chapter 6, at least one college in the sample (Thameside) problematised students on GNVQ courses.

This does not imply that colleges are simply agencies of the state, replicating social disadvantage in a systematic manner. As has been seen, colleges are contradictory sites of social class and are 'busy institutions' (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) in the reproduction of class. College lecturers are in contradictory class positions in terms of their location. Their historical location involves both elements from which they could consider themselves to both be middle class and (increasingly) working class in terms of the increased proletarianisation of their profession. Within this site, groups of lecturers may take up differing positions. As seen in Chapter 6, there is evidence that industrial action by lecturers at Thameside was beneficial in terms of protecting the course time of vocational students at the college. However, to be generalised this finding would require more extensive evidence.

All considered, this means that class should be treated not just as a process of identity formation but as a series of processes and conflicts which both involve and transcend the

individual (Skeggs, 2002b). The differences between working and middle class students habitus in this thesis are not as great as may be expected by culturalist theorists. Moreover, in relation to the overall distribution of resources the differences between their capitals is not so great (although perhaps even the small differences between these capitals makes a difference) – at least compared to the capitals of the ruling class (who rarely appear in educational theorising) and other classes. Individuals are not ‘Althusian Dupes’, trapped by their class position and colleges are not ‘Ideological State Apparatus’ (Althusser, 1977), blindly following edicts of the state. However, the ways in which class is ‘played out’ within fields such as the college setting reflects dominant structures of power. Although working class students may have their own sources of capital and influence, the ways in which the college values these capitals is not neutral. In Chapter 6, I discussed various reasons for the de-valuation of student cultural capital at Thameside College such as historical trends in the meaning of ‘whiteness’, recent policy and college processes. One fruitful area for study of these processes might be how relations between lecturers and management influence perceptions of students. Randle and Brady (1997) and Elliott (2000) argues that due to funding and marketisation employment relations in the FE sector are increasingly characterised by ‘...emergent and oppositional cultures’ (Elliott, 2000: 149). As discussed in the previous chapter, the desire of lecturers to maintain cultural distance from working class students in the face of worsening employment conditions could be seen to be a feature of these ‘oppositional cultures’. However, this is a working theory that would need to be investigated through future case studies.

Relating this to research on progression to HE generally there has been an *over-emphasis* on student voices and action in progression. This approach tends to disguise the voices and actions of those who wield more power over student destinies. The approach also tends to fetishise student difference with dichotomies drawn up to differentiate educational strategies between working and middle class students, ethnic minority students, disabled students and gay and lesbian students. Such Balkanising approaches, whilst capable of identifying the manner in which power can be wielded selectively or arbitrarily, fail to identify points of similarity between students. For example, white, middle class men and black, working class women have in common that they almost universally enter the labour market and, at least within FE, notionally are both educated by the state rather than escaping into the private sector. As this thesis shows it is partly by institutional processes, rather than any essentialist notion of difference that distinctions are made between them – at least in terms of progression to HE. In the case of this study, the creation of difference between white working class and middle class students seen in Chapter 6 is mediated and re-created through processes of rationing, vocationalism and labelling by the college.

### **7.3. RESEARCH**

#### **7.3.1 New directions for the economics of education?**

Research in the economics of education on human capital theory has recently been both bold and original in content. Rather than dogmatically follow the propositions of human capital theory in terms of atomised and ahistorical individuals, human capital theorists have analysed the impact of wealth, asymmetric information and social networks on

educational progression (Ludwig, 1999; Brunello, 2002). This work at least partially addresses concerns from outside the discipline (namely from sociologists) that the economics of education does not concern itself with considerations of social and cultural capital. Albeit in the forms of 'information asymmetry' or 'market failure' these issues are addressed in some form. What is concerning, though, is the lack of methodological and literary pluralism in examining economic issues, in particular human capital theory.

In other areas of economics – political economy and feminist economics – the predominance of econometric models based on assumptions concerning atomistic actors has been challenged. In political economy the historical analysis of economies, institutions and classes in qualitative form (or through the use of mixed methods) has long been acceptable. For some feminist economists, the primacy of econometrics and the passive voice of the (usually male, white, middle class) author in economic research should be challenged in favour of methods such as ethnography (Pujol, 1997). It was not always the case that economics as a whole, and particularly the economics of education, was such a singular discipline. In his book *Knowledge and Persuasion in Economics* (1994) McCloskey explains how conventions such as the use of a scientific style and the overuse of mathematical formalism are as rhetorical as other literary devices. Although it is 'false to say that the style of argument in economics has become more quantitative over the last sixty years' (McCloskey, 1994: 113) there has been a shift in literary style towards '.. the ethos, persona, implied author of the Scientist' (McCloskey, 1994: 114, his capitalisation). This movement away from literary, and consequently metaphorical, styles of writing in economics means that certain styles of argument can hardly be

articulated within its boundaries. Themes in this thesis including rationing, choice and perceived costs and benefits are properly economic but their articulation in this thesis through the inclusion of an ethnographic style of writing mean that they would not be accepted by most professional economists, or reviewers, as the work of proper economics.

By broadening the methodological scope of the economics of education we are able to address questions of agency and rationality in not only different, but also perhaps better, ways. In this thesis, qualitative data has been used to raise issues that quantitative data (at least in the form used, although arguably in any form) could not. Without a qualitative perspective on how GCSE scores are used in colleges to position students, I may have concluded that progression to HE was all about differences in ability, rather than how GCSE scores are used by 'busy institutions' – namely FE colleges – in their procedures. Additionally, ethnography was required to uncover evidence concerning how students were allocated to courses (although admittedly Gillborn and Youdell use depth interviews to identify similar information concerning rationing in schools).

The usefulness of qualitative data on families, institutions and individuals in analysing progression may be particularly fruitful in addressing a fundamental question in the economics of education. Namely: what is the correct level of aggregation of the decision making unit? This is an area where qualitative research is of great potential as quantitative techniques can not currently model the tensions between various levels of decision making. Although multi-level modelling does model individual behaviour

within clusters of family, educational institution and area, there are dynamic considerations involving relative power relations between these levels to consider. Although this thesis has not tackled this question directly, one can see how student progression to HE is the result of various tensions between students and their families, students and their colleges, and even lecturers within the college. The modelling of these particular struggles is particularly apt for a more qualitative style of economic investigation.

There are some areas, though, where neither quantitative nor qualitative data alone are appropriate. Here, mixed methods research may be fruitful. In this thesis, I have shown the differences and similarities between economic expectations expressed as quantitative responses to a survey and as qualitative responses to an open ended interview. One method is not necessarily more accurate than another but together they reveal deeper levels of individual account. In individual discourse, monetary amounts were infrequently referred to. Individuals speak about 'lots of money' or 'about the same as their parents' or 'not a clue of how much'. There is a tacit understanding of earnings in HE (filtered through class 'scripts') that is hardly ever expressed in pounds. However, individuals were also able (with some coaxing) to estimate earnings and debt both with and without HE with a fair amount of judgement in that on average the ex-ante rates of return and expected debts were not too far distant from those gained by former cohorts of students. They therefore had a reasonable understanding of the financial consequences of HE. On this point, it must be said that the methodology demonstrated here indicates that for ex-ante surveys of expectations it is prudent to ask students to record expectations at

five-yearly intervals. Earlier survey of ex-ante expectations (Williams and Gordon, 1981; Menon, 1997) which did not use this method may have underestimated student earnings expectations by assuming that earnings would peak at age 46. For students in this sample, this was not the case.

These joint expressions of earnings, debt and returns are not necessarily contradictory. In fact, they remind us that for individuals the valuation of future returns is a social as well as an economic category. Acting on the expectation that HE will lead to earning 'lots of money' is a good human capital explanation. That such evidence would not satisfy most economists in the same way as a t-statistic means that we may need to reconsider the way we look at human capital theory, as a phenomenological theory rather than as a purely positivist one. That is, we need to consider the ways in which individuals interpret categories such as earnings and debt as metaphorical entities rather than relational qualities in terms of pounds and pence. Terms such as 'crippling debt' and the 'burden of debt' remind us that economic categories have a social meaning for individuals. Debt can be perceived as something that injures or disables. In this thesis, the metaphor of 'burden' for some working class students with regard to debt, despite their lower monetary expectations of debt (on average), signifies something about the social nature of debt for this class. A creative, phenomenological and social approach to the ways in which we both consider and research human capital theory could be a fertile approach for future research. Discrepancies between (quantitative) ex-ante expectations and student discourse, emotions, images and even dreams of earnings and debt (and the implications



of each for behaviour) would be a fruitful area for future research and methodological development.

### **7.3.2 'Lecturer Ethnographies' in FE**

As a lecturer working in FE during the research period, this study yielded some interesting methodological points concerning what might be called 'lecturer ethnographies' in FE. There are important differences between policy based research in FE and ethnography more generally (Avis, 1994). Namely, that the purposes of policy research may be influenced the motivations of the funder and hence skewed to a certain ideological viewpoints. The use of 'policy biography' by the DfES as a policy weapon in securing support from the Cabinet Office and funding from the Treasury is a case in point. Avis, though, is rather accepting that ethnography pursued by other means may be ideologically 'purer' than policy based research - by which he means following a left / Marxist perspective. There seems to be no reason why this should be the case. Writers of PhD theses or journal articles have their own sets of considerations when pursuing an argument.

I would contend, though, that lecturer ethnographies in FE have a critical function in revealing conditions in the sector. Not least, because lecturer ethnographies are worker ethnographies. That is, the lecturer has intimate knowledge of the conditions of employment in terms of the stresses and absurdities of the job. There is the potential for this type of writing to act as a form of auto-ethnography (an ethnography of the self) which may reveal more concerning the realities of the sector than the ethnography of an external researcher. In this research, the ethnographies were seemingly compromised by

considerations of both tiredness (being 'too tired to write') and demands of work (not allowing time off for interviews, visiting other colleges, writing up). These are constraints on the research, but also act as critical indicators of the pressures in the sector for increased productivity.

Worker ethnographies also allow one to re-interpret ethnographic findings in the context of the employment relationship. The pressure for management at Thameside and other colleges for rationing of the academic route meant that the categorisation of vocational students can not be simply regarded as middle class bias. Despite the fact that a proportion of the lecturers were originally themselves of a similar working class background, they were complicit in the labelling of students. Therefore, the categorisation of students can be thought to partly result from the conditions of employment. Obviously, that the students are people rather than products (despite the way that they are commoditised and sorted by management) might make it seem ethically less acceptable to be a cynical lecturer / teacher than a cynical factory worker. Indeed, the cynical teacher / lecturers are often demonised both by government and academics alike.

As a lecturer living in the area I also had some insights into the students' daily lives at least in terms of familiar references; seeing them in the street or in their part time jobs. That I had worked in the area for a long period of time also meant that I had witnessed the changes in the college, and its orientation towards students over a long period of time.

However, there are a couple of claims often made in this type of ethnographic research which I would not make.

The first is that I had any special knowledge of the students' lives over and above what I have already mentioned. I am no longer in touch with any of the students in the sample and did not have any additional contact with their parents over and above being a lecturer. Again, this relates partly to the nature of 'lecturer ethnography' in FE (at least for me) in terms of the boundary work necessary to maintain status as a lecturer and my identity in the local community amongst my peers. This may be contrary to the approaches adopted by other researchers in teacher or lecturer ethnography (Skeggs, 1997; Mac an Ghaill, 1994) although I would argue that there were particular circumstances in these ethnographies which made such relations possible, for example, shared ethnicity. Again, for me, the pressures of work made '...an unceasing effort of sociability' (Bourdieu, 1986: 250) not a valid option.

Secondly, and more controversially I do not claim that this research was particularly empowering in any major way for the subjects. Such claims are seductive in that they actually privilege the researcher whilst claiming to privilege the subjects. The researcher can claim that their subjects are gaining in terms of some political advancement or enlightenment whilst actually their reputation in the research community is being advanced. Whilst it may be true that some researchers do adopt a co-operative form of research (Lynch, 1998) the subjects are never granted joint authorship of articles arising from this research! Their gain is intangible, and arguably, insubstantial.

More dubious still are claims that research acts to provide the dispossessed with a voice. When examined, the nature of this 'voice' is a weak form of speech. 'Voices' (which are universally written) appearing in research are selected (or selectively quoted) by the researcher and read by very few (in academic journals) compared to those which might be read in other media.

So there is little empowerment (other than my own) that I am aware of. I have used the voices of others to substantiate my arguments. However, the use of research to illustrate *unpalatable truths* has been achieved; in this case that institutions act systematically to ration access to their courses (and subsequently HE).

## **7.4. POLICY AND CONCLUSION**

### **7.4.1 Changing structures, changing cultures**

This thesis has illustrated that attempts to act upon a 'culture of low expectations' (DfES, 2003a) of working class and ethnic minority students by government will not necessarily increase participation in HE as currently construed. There is little evidence that such students in this sample have low economic expectations and, in any case, these are not necessarily acted on in deciding to apply to HE. Although culturally and socially students and their families have different endowments of capitals (social, economic, cultural, emotional, human) and deploy these in different ways I have concluded that differences between middle and working class students with regard to the deployment of these resources have probably been overstated. The middle class may have more, but the

working class use creative strategies in terms of attaining HE qualifications. The reasons why they don't get there are not (just) to do with the fact that the middle class have greater resources, but that FE and HE institutions act systematically, to close options off to those students leaving them with low-status alternatives and little way to improve their situation after 16. There was no evidence that the FE colleges wanted students to fail – but there was little consideration of widening participation in HE. As in schools, in these colleges there was evidence of an '...institutionalisation of inequality that has been accomplished through the increased adoption of selection by ability.' (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 198)

As in other work, this suggests that institutional reform is necessary. As Archer, Hutchings, Leathwood and Ross (2003) argue a '... solely individualistic focus on widening participation is inadequate. There is an important role to be played through the interrogation and challenging of institutional cultures' (197). As my analysis of FE colleges has shown, this applies to FE as well as HE. This challenge of institutional cultures may require a re-thinking of how FE colleges operate, not just in terms of organisational culture, but also in terms of relations of power. The concept of institutional habitus might be a particularly important theorising and policy concept here (Reay, David and Ball, 2001). As Thomas (2002) explains, the concept of institutional habitus applies Bourdieu's personal concept of habitus in relation to organisations. Institutional habitus '...refers to relational issues and priorities which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice' (Thomas, 2002: 431). Thomas argues that mis-matches between student and institutional habitus require an institution

that is ‘...inclusive and accepting of difference, and does not prioritise or valorise one set of characteristics, but rather celebrates and prizes diversity or difference’ (Thomas, 2002: 431). This might involve policies which minimise the social difference between staff and students and using inclusive teaching, learning and student living arrangements (Thomas, 2002: 439). Fundamentally, though, it requires challenging of college ‘rationing’ and inequitable treatment of students on vocational courses. Although since the research was conducted in this thesis, the funding of colleges has transferred from the FEFC to the LSC (Learning and Skills Council) there is still a financial incentive for SF colleges to pursue reputational strategies (Robinson, 2000) and to limit access to A level courses.

This is not necessarily an issue for FE managers and policy makers alone. It is important to consider various levels of analysis: ‘...participants at every level of the system can affect change, but in isolation, only within certain limits’ (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000: 220). However, this is not just a matter of ‘consciousness raising’. There are market incentives for colleges to maintain discrimination.

In terms of what this means for HE, although a ‘radical re-imagining of education policy’ (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) might be necessary, there is a poverty of imagination in terms of what this might mean in terms of provision for ‘non-traditional students’ (Pratt, 1999). Some argue that this might involve changing the definition of a university with ‘...a shift away from current notions of a fixed-university site, and may require de-centered learning that takes place within working class communities, *but on their own terms*’ (Archer, Hutchings, Leathwood and Ross, 2003: 200, author’s italics). Although

intuitively appealing, we should be cautious that such ‘alternatives’ for working class students do not become the pathologised norm. As this thesis has shown, the separation of students into separate institutions or tracks is not necessarily conducive to their future educational progress. Perhaps the changing of the ‘terms’ of established institutions would be more likely to affect change.

#### **7.4.2 Policy pragmatics: lessons for FE colleges, HEIs and national policy**

Although radical changes to structures and institutional cultures are necessary if the nature of participation in HE is to be fundamentally altered, there are some practical lessons arising from this thesis about what might be achieved in the near future.

For FE colleges, this thesis suggests two areas where student transition to HE could be facilitated. Firstly, there is a lack of congruence between the ways in which colleges market courses to students (as informed choice) and the rationing of academic courses (as discussed in Chapter 5). It has been suggested that this has implications for both progression to HE and the types of HE that students apply to. Colleges should consider the transparency of this process of course allocation and whether such procedures are in students’ best interests. A more considered matching of student interests to courses might involve a creative approach rather than automatic allocation to a vocational (or academic) route. For example, re-taking GCSEs, access courses or a truly mixed academic / vocational combination of subjects might be more suitable routes into HE for students with low entry qualifications. Such creative approaches to course matching would, though, require a funding regime which would allow FE colleges to absorb

possible risks of such an approach. At the least, FE colleges should monitor the effect of placing students on a particular track with regard to their progression to HE.

Secondly, within FE colleges, the actions of other students, staff and management can have an influence on future participation. There is evidence in Chapter 5 that a strategy for transition to HE for working class students might be collective, rather than individual. As the focus of careers counselling is often on individual decisions this finding suggests an alternative approach with such students. However, there is also a need to address more systematic discrimination within colleges. The ways in which vocational students are treated within Thameside College suggests that differential treatment on the basis of class may be particularly insidious and hard to recognise (as in this case it takes place through the pathologising of consumption). There is also evidence (from Chapter 5) that working class families can use resources of social and emotional capital in making the transition to HE. This implies staff (and management) development in this area to recognise and mobilise these resources and address sources of possible prejudice.

For HEIs, the acceptance of alternative qualifications (such as GNVQ) and student circumstances is becoming more established amongst providers, although the newer HEIs are more receptive to such approaches (Thomas, 2002). Such approaches are necessary across all institutions if marginalised students in FE are to consider HE progression. As this thesis has shown, 'choice' of subject is often a misnomer for FE students who additionally have little opportunity to increase their range of HE options through effort. As part of more general efforts to increase participation of 'non-traditional students',



HEIs should consider the institutional origins and routes (not just in terms of private or state schooling) of students alongside social and other characteristics.

At the level of national policy, access to HE is not just a matter of individual aspiration or attainment, but connected with the ways in which transitions through FE are structured.

Access to HE for FE students is also complex in that different influences may have different effects at each stage of the process (as discussed in Chapter 4). This means that there should be various foci for policy aside from ‘...attainment, aspiration and application’ (DfES, 2003c: 5). As discussed in this thesis, the ways in which colleges allocated students to courses, family resources and social class also influence this process. In policy terms, this means that achieving widening participation targets may potentially involve addressing resource inequalities and transition pathways through education – particularly FE. Although the former (resource inequalities) potentially involves a whole swathe of policy initiatives the system of 14-19 progression is currently under review (DfES, 2003c: 9). To effectively widen participation, the 14-19 curriculum needs to allow students on various routes to successfully access a range of higher levels. This thesis shows the complexity of such transitions and the consequences of rationing access to courses at one level (academic FE) for progression to the next (HE).

### **7.4.3 Policy futures and conclusion**

Since the research in this thesis was conducted GNVQ has largely been replaced by the AVCE (Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education) although the substitution of GNVQ by an (arguably) ‘less’ vocational qualification may not resolve issues of parity of esteem (Gleeson and Hodkinson, 2000: 109). Another alternative qualification, the 16+

Baccalaureate may seem to offer a portfolio approach to bridge the academic / vocational divide, evidence from other countries suggests that class divisions soon re-establish themselves (Hatcher, 1998). The general picture in terms of widening participation has also become more complex as efforts to increase participation by working class students are being resisted by some schools who are undertaking direct action by dissuading their candidates from applying to HEIs which aim to widen participation ('Private schools boycott Bristol over selection', Guardian, 5/3/2003: 2).

Under great financial pressure, HEIs are increasingly accepting government demands for differential fees – particularly amongst the 'Russell group' universities (DfES, 2003c). Moreover, the government is currently examining proposals to distinguish HEIs further by sub-division into teaching and research institutions (DfES, 2003c). A possible consequence might be not only a two tier system of HE, but a multi-tier system with a ranked elite of HE institutions and a morass of other providers.

Even given that working class and ethnic minority students might still be offered low status alternatives, at arguably the same private cost as other institutions, it must be said that the government will, in all probability, meet its target of increasing participation in HE to 50% of under 30 year olds by 2010. That this can be said with some certainty does not mean that the traditional pattern of participation in established HE institutions will continue. At West Essex College, for example, many students continued their education in FE rather than in an HEI – this seems to be increasingly likely for many ethnic minority and working class students. Moreover, that employers still value degree

qualifications (DfES, 2003c) means that there will be pressure on students to attend HE, even if it is not to take the degree or qualification which they expected.

This thesis has shown that 'vocational allocation' in FE serves to position and mark students whilst narrowing their participation in HE in terms of actual attendance and choice of institution. As well as considerations of social justice, such educational inequality is also socially destabilising. There is some evidence (albeit cross-sectional) that, even controlling for income inequality, educational inequality is harmful to social cohesion. It is no coincidence that those countries with better welfare provision and less educational inequality (in particular the Nordic countries) have better outcomes in terms of crime, tolerance and trust than where educational equality is less equal (Green and Preston, 2001; Green, Preston and Sabates, 2003).

This negative conclusion does not mean that policy is over-determined by government. One of the strongest and oft ignored sections in *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) is not on the nature of reproduction but on the contested nature of educational policy in the United States. Areas of policy such as vocationalism and tracking in schools were resisted by trade unions and communities and this strand of *Schooling in Capitalist America* has been taken on board by those who otherwise are critical of the work (Apple, 2001; Allman, 2001).

FE colleges are potentially contradictory sites and sites of power. On the one hand they are self-interested and reactionary – at least in terms of limiting access to certain

qualifications. On the other, they are potentially transformative of individual and collective lives – there are success stories in this thesis of working class students who get to HE. As with all forms of regulation, such as the rationing of qualifications, new forms of resistance might be expected to emerge. Policy is made on the ground as well as within the DfES and this is the area in which I consider my future research, and political agenda, will be.

## **APPENDIX 1: STUDENT SURVEY**

### **Questionnaire – thinking about your future**

Dear Student

This questionnaire is part of a research project to identify the expectations of people of your age group. It will ask you to make predictions as to what you might be doing in the future in terms of your education, employment and earnings.

There are other questions related to views about your career.

The information gained from this questionnaire will be treated in confidence. However, if you do not want to take part, please let the researcher know.

Answer all of the questions. If you do not know the answer, then take a guess! Do not leave any of the boxes empty. Please write your answers in each section or tick the boxes.

I would like to thank you in advance for your co-operation in this research.

Yours sincerely

John Preston

**Section 1: Background Information**

1) First Name:
2) Surname:
3) College:
4) Age:
5) Ethnicity (please tick) White: ____ Black-Caribbean: ____ Black-African: ____ Black-Other: ____ Indian: ____ Pakistani: ____ Chinese: ____ Any other ethnic group or mixed race: ____ - please describe: ____
6) Parent or guardian(s) occupations:- (Include details of <i>both</i> parent or guardian(s) occupations if appropriate. For each, indicate whether the parent or guardian is male or female) i) ____ ii) ____
7) Parent or guardian(s) education. Tick the highest educational level attained by <i>each</i> of your parents or guardians if appropriate:- i) Below G.C.S.E. or equivalent: - ____ G.C.S.E. or equivalent: - ____ "A" level or equivalent: - ____ Degree or equivalent: - ____ Don't know:- ____ ii) Below G.C.S.E. or equivalent: - ____ G.C.S.E. or equivalent: - ____ "A" level or equivalent: - ____ Degree or equivalent: - ____ Don't know:- ____

9) Subjects studied.

Include all of the “A” level, G.C.S.E., G.N.V.Q. and N.V.Q. subjects which you are currently studying at College.

Subject	Level

10) Examination Results

Include all G.C.S.E. examinations taken to date, *even if you failed or obtained a low grade*. If you have previously taken a G.N.V.Q. subject, then enter the level and grade in the box on the bottom right.

G.C.S.E. Subject	Grade	G.C.S.E. Subject	Grade
		<div>G.N.V.Q.      Grade</div>	

## Section 2: Expected future earnings after College

11) The table (below) asks you about how much you would expect to earn **after leaving College at 18, or older**. Earnings in this question mean your net income, that is your income after taxes and benefits. Each of the columns represents a different age of your life.

Tick one box in each column to show how much you would expect to earn at each age. Assume that prices remain at their current levels.

Age	18 *	23	28	33	38	43	48	53	58	63
£3,000 or less										
£6,000										
£9,000										
£12,000										
£15,000										
£18,000										
£21,000										
£24,000										
£27,000										
£30,000										
£33,000										
£36,000										
£39,000										
£42,000										
£45,000										
£48,000										
£51,000										
£54,000										
£57,000										
£60,000										
£63,000										
£66,000										
£69,000										
£72,000										
£75,000										
£78,000										
£81,000										
£84,000										
Over £84,000										

\*: or age of leaving if greater than 18.



**Section 3: About University (Higher Education)**

12) After leaving College, do you intend to continue with your full time education?

Yes: ☐: *go to question 13.*

No: ☐: *go to question 14.*

13) After leaving College I intend to study at:-

Oxford or Cambridge: ☐

An established University (such as The University of Essex): ☐

A new University (such as The University of East London): ☐

Other (Please state): \_\_\_\_\_

14) The table (below) asks you about how much you would expect to earn **after leaving University at 21**. Earnings in this question mean your net income, that is your income after taxes and benefits. *Answer this question even if you do not expect to go to University.*

Tick one box in each column to show how much you would expect to earn at each age. Assume that prices remain at their current levels.

Age	21 *	23	28	33	38	43	48	53	58	63
£3,000 or less										
£6,000										
£9,000										
£12,000										
£15,000										
£18,000										
£21,000										
£24,000										
£27,000										
£30,000										
£33,000										
£36,000										
£39,000										
£42,000										
£45,000										
£48,000										
£51,000										
£54,000										
£57,000										
£60,000										
£63,000										
£66,000										
£69,000										
£72,000										
£75,000										
£78,000										
£81,000										
£84,000										
Over £84,000										

\*: or age of leaving if this is greater than 21.

15) If you went to University, tick how much you would expect to have saved or be in debt for each of the three years which you were there.

Savings / Debt each year	Tick one box
Savings of £3,000	
Savings of £2,000	
Savings of £1,000	
No savings	
Debts of £1,000	
Debts of £2,000	
Debts of £3,000	
Debts of £4,000	
Debts of £5,000	
Debts of £6,000	
Debts of £7,000	
Debts of over £8,000	

16) After leaving College or University, my most likely occupation would be: -

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. If you have any further comments which you would like to make, then please include them below:-

## **APPENDIX 2: LOGISTIC REGRESSIONS WITH DEBT AS AN INDEPENDENT VARIABLE**

In order to test whether expected debt alone would influence the intention or application decision, the logistic regressions in Chapter 4 were re-run using expected debt as an independent variable, rather than the rate of return. The independent variable DEBTS (mean=£6428, s.d. = £6628) was used in the analysis. Those who expected to save money whilst at university were inferred to have an expected debt of zero. As can be seen from the two regressions (below) expected debt did not influence the intention or application decision.

		3.46	12.1500*	2.88
DEBTS	-0.019	0.23	0.82	0.42
CONSTANT	5.14	11.73	7.37	1.35

**Table 13: Logistic regression for intention with standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics and odds ratio (DEBTS as a covariate)**

Pseudo R<sup>2</sup> (Cox and Snell): 0.120

-2 Log Likelihood: 154.625

Percentage applications predicted: 74.7%

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds ratio
DEBTS	.000	.000	.051	1.000
CLASS	.671	.422	2.524	1.956
ETHNIC	2.543	.786	10.474***	2.808
G_SCORE	-.019	.220	.007	.982
CONSTANT	.314	1.175	.071	1.369

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

**Table 14: Logistic regression for application with standardised regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics and odds ratio (DEBTS as a covariate)**

Pseudo R<sup>2</sup> (Cox and Snell): 0.109

-2 Log Likelihood: 191.367

Percentage applications predicted: 60.4%

	B	S.E.	Wald	Odds ratio
DEBTS	.000	.000	.395	1.000
CLASS	-.218	.381	.328	.804
ETHNIC	1.114	.442	6.350*	3.048
G_SCORE	.698	.218	10.260***	2.009
CONSTANT	-3.256	1.120	8.452	.039

\*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

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